

Boost to park is blow to S.F. nursery school

Haight-Ashbury co-op squeezed by city program

By Katherine Seligman
OF THE EXAMINER STAFF

A long-awaited boost in the Recreation and Park Department budget may translate into misfortune for a Haight-Ashbury nursery school that has made its home for the past 22 years in a city park.

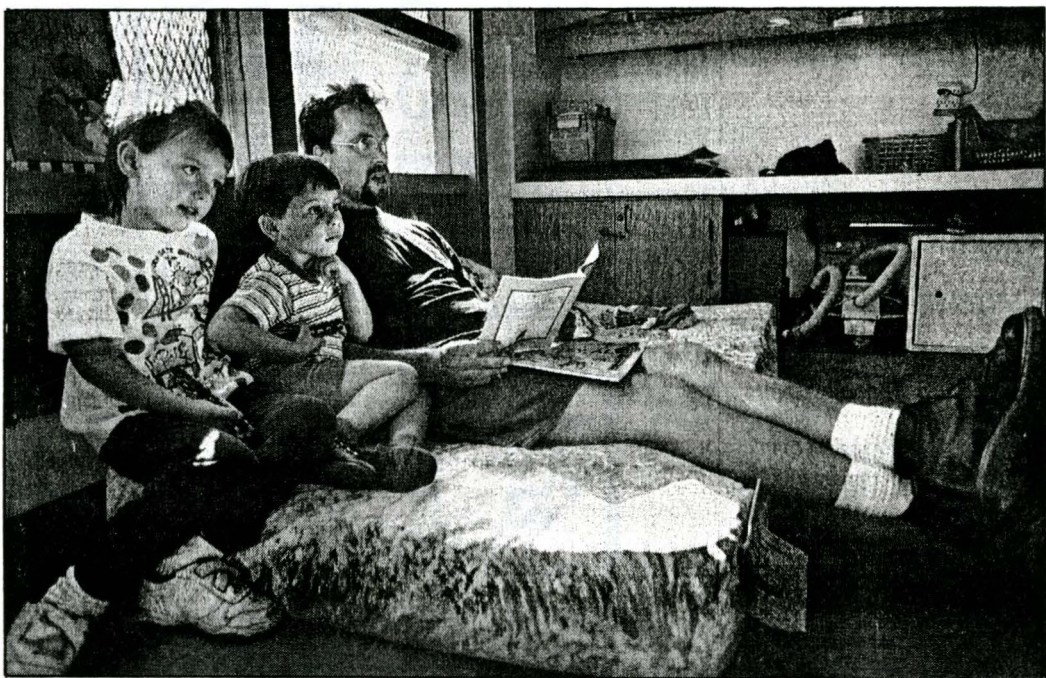
The department has put the Haight-Ashbury Cooperative

Nursery School on notice that its lease will not be renewed next year. Grattan Park facilities at Alma and Stanyan streets might instead be used full-time for city recreation programs.

The notice received last month has upset parents of the co-op's 22 children who say it makes no sense to kick out a program that has done a stellar job of serving neighborhood kids.

"We are a neighborhood institution," said James Letchworth, a parent who has had two children in the school. "We have always pro-

[See *SCHOOL*, A-8]



EXAMINER/KATY RADDATZ

Frank Van Natta reads to Ana and Nathan at the Haight-Ashbury Cooperative Nursery School.

◆ SCHOOL from A-1

Funds boost perils S.F. nursery school

vided a safe place for not just our kids but for all the neighborhood kids. I don't think people realize what the consequences of this action would be."

Neighborhood complaints

Joel Robinson, recreation superintendent of the Recreation and Park Department, said some neighborhood residents have complained that their children couldn't use the play area when the school was in session on weekday mornings.

"In the spring I had an irate woman call and say, 'How dare these people come into a public park and say I can't use the play structure?'"

Robinson said he received numerous letters asking for public programs, but would not reveal who had sent them.

He said his first choice would be a compromise that wouldn't displace the school, but he is obligated to listen to neighborhood residents who want more public programs.

"If we don't, the Grattan neighborhood will have a legitimate gripe," he said. "They will say, 'Why didn't any of this money come to my neighborhood? We pay taxes and we deserve services.'"

The money Robinson refers to is a \$1.75 million addition to the department's 1995-96 budget, approved by the Board of Supervisors in August. The additional money brings the total budget to \$12.9 million.

Welcome boost

In an era where cost-cutting has been the norm, the boost was welcome. It can be used, at Grattan and elsewhere, to extend park hours, enhance programs and fund

new Tiny Tots programs, senior citizen programs or services for teens. But it is not without its controversy.

"We are a department people get possessive of," said Robinson.

Parents in the co-op — which pays \$432 a month in rent to The City — say they are all in favor of more park programs, but that the department should think twice before booting them out and installing a program that would serve kids the same age.

"It would be terrible for me," said Doll McMillan, who has had two children in the co-op and plans to put her youngest child there too. "This place has been such a positive experience for us."

McMillan knew nothing about the co-op before she began taking her oldest daughter to the park as a baby. She noticed the sand toys, tricycles, costumes and paint easels set outside.

"At first you see the toys and you think your children shouldn't play with things," said Rachel Heller, another co-op parent. "Then people say your kids can play with them."

Director Cocoa Drake said the school has a policy of letting all children enjoy co-op toys and art projects outside. The co-op's license does not allow kids who aren't enrolled to come inside where there are additional toys, books, music and a kitchen to prepare snacks.

The park also has tennis and basketball courts, and a play area for older children.

Visitors welcome

Two "welcome" signs in a play area adjacent to the clubhouse tell visitors they can use the outdoor equipment.

"We don't chase people away," Drake said.

On a recent visit, toddlers from the neighborhood played alongside co-op kids. Shirley Sun-Forbes said she likes the park because she never has to remember to pack toys.

"We can use the toys here," she said. "They never say, 'Don't touch that.'"

"I've always felt totally welcome," said Sally Romer, watching

her 18-month-old son stockpile sand buckets and shovels. "Even if there were another program I don't think it would have the same spirit."

But city programs, Robinson said, would be open to all parents. Co-op parents pay \$130 a month and volunteer at the school one day a week.

This year the co-op has been able to take all kids who wanted admission. Slightly more than half the children come from the immediate neighborhood; others live in the Sunset District and Western Addition.

Co-op members point out that, without them, the clubhouse would have been closed mornings for the past 20 years. They also note that they built the first play structure, an additional room at the clubhouse and a storage shed at no cost to The City.

Drake used to come in on Sundays to mop the floor until janitorial service improved in the past year. She said that, when needed, parents clean the yard and the building.

Co-op 'a blessing'

Robinson acknowledges that the co-op was "a blessing" in post-Proposition 13 times when there was scant money for park programs. The department's notice calls co-op members "exemplary tenants."

Robinson said he will meet with co-op members and park neighbors to develop a plan that, hopefully, makes everyone happy.

Parents note that the co-op has weathered many troubles, starting in 1978 when a first eviction notice arrived and was then rescinded. In 1987, the school was in the limelight when parents were divided over whether a volunteer with AIDS should be allowed to stay. He did, but more than a quarter of the co-op families resigned.

That same year, The City threatened again to kick out the co-op to make way for other programs. A compromise involved revised hours and a new program for latchkey children that still runs in the afternoons.

"This is another crisis," said Letchworth, "and we'll survive it."

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