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## **POGO PARK'S GIANT LEAP**

By: Mike Aldax

Clever do-it-yourself project ideas are all the rage right now. But they are nothing new to Iron Triangle residents such as Tonie Lee.

Rather than shell out a pretty penny for a shiny new grill at the department store, Lee recalls folks in her low-income neighborhood setting grills onto park trash cans in order to have barbecues.

"My grandfather would just make [the grills]," Lee said.

Today, that example of ingenuity is one of several transforming into actual products as part of a company that is entirely run by Iron Triangle residents.

Last week, a launch party was held at Harbour-8 Park on the Richmond Greenway for Pogo Park Products, an Iron Triangle for-profit social enterprise that is getting its start thanks to a \$1 million investment from Chevron Richmond's eEquip Richmond, an economic revitalization initiative.

The grant will fund product ideas that have been 10 years in the making — since the founding of the award-winning Pogo Park nonprofit. Noted inventor and entrepreneur [Toody Maher](#) started Pogo Park in 2007 with the aim of employing and training Iron Triangle residents in projects that revitalize neglected parks in their neighborhood.

Instead of hiring outside contractors, the Pogo Park staff designed and constructed park structures and amenities on their own — while receiving job-skills training in the process.

The nonprofit partnered with the master artists at the influential Scientific Art Studio (SAS) of Richmond — the shop behind the creation of the giant glove at AT&T Park and the new play areas at San Francisco Zoo — and their combined impact has been significant, leading to the development of the award-winning Elm Playlot at 720 Elm Ave., Harbour-8 Park and the Yellow Brick Road Project pedestrian network.

After 10 years of creating parks and park amenities, Pogo Park has built enough custom-made items to make up a full product line that can be sold for use in parks far beyond Richmond. That products line is one of several local economic development ideas receiving a share of \$10 million in Chevron eEquip Richmond funds over the next three years.

## Video: Tonie Lee discusses new park grills



### Pogo Park Products

Lee, who has worked with Pogo Park from the start, recalled her grandfather's barbecue grills for a good reason. While brainstorming ideas for park amenities, she and her sister hatched the idea that Pogo Park could build barbecue grills from scratch.

Along with original grills, Pogo Park Products offers attractive, durable park furniture such as benches and tables, decorative water fountains, swing sets, park signs, sandboxes, playhouses, forts, climbing structures — pretty much anything that can create a fun, safe and educational play space for families. Not only that, the new Iron Triangle company provides custom park design and planning services.

Pogo Park Products has already received the thumbs up from California State Parks Manager Viktor Patino, who called Pogo Park "a new model for community-led parks for the state of California."

“The Pogo Park model really stands out for how it empowers and involves residents in every phase of design,” Patino said. “Over 16 years that I have been working and traveling to parks, this is very rare to find. I think other cities can benefit from learning more about how the Pogo Park team was able to make their project successful.”

## Video: Pogo Park Products launch party



Richmond Mayor Tom Butt attested to Pogo Park’s impact in his own city. Speaking at the launch party at Harbour-8 along the Richmond Greenway (near Harbour Way), the mayor recalled when the Greenway was an overgrown, unused and unsafe former railway corridor in the 1980s. Today it is an ever-evolving pedestrian and cycling pathway, increasingly colored by play spaces, gardens, attractive landscaping and public art. Like Elm Playlot and Harbour-8, many of the new park areas have been organized as part of community efforts — a tactic that has expanded in influence, Mayor Butt said. “This method of doing parks is spreading around the state and is being recognized,” the mayor said. “Why somebody didn’t think about this before, I don’t know.”

## Video: Toody Maher Talks Pogo Park



Far beyond Richmond, according to Maher, there is a “strong and growing market demand for high quality play environments” that are hand-built to fit particular spaces. “By launching Pogo Park Products, we can capitalize on this market trend and become an engine of economic development in the Iron Triangle,” Maher says. Maher has called last week’s launch party “their day,” referring to her hard-working Pogo Park staffers. However, her staff members declined to take credit without paying homage to Maher. “This is a childhood dream to me,” longtime Iron Triangle resident Jerry Doss said. “This is what I’ve wanted to do. Toody, she’s a visionary. She knows what she’s doing. She gets everyone together, and dreams come true.”



## eEquip Richmond

Pogo Park Products is one of several collaborative projects receiving support from eEquip Richmond.

Chevron's \$10 million, three-year investment creates projects that directly address economic needs of specific neighborhoods and their residents, such as job-focused training, support for entrepreneurship, business retention and expansion, and securing permanent pathways to sustainable, living wage or better jobs and careers in growth industries.

Pogo Park Products does just that – the for-profit social enterprise provides jobs and job training to local residents as part of a partnership uplifting multiple community businesses, all the while helping to beautify local parks. .

But there are other clever projects at play: The **Construction Resource Center (CRC)**, a business accelerator providing business incubation and job training in construction sciences and trades and the green construction industry. The CRC, led by East Bay Resource Center in partnership with RichmondBUILD and The Stride Center, opened in October of last year.

And there's also **CoBiz Richmond**, which is expected to open in the ground floor of the Richmond BART Station parking garage on Macdonald Avenue early next year. CoBiz Richmond will provide a co-working and event space and small business incubator in the

heart of downtown. It will specifically serve the needs of small businesses, entrepreneurs and other professionals.

eEquip Richmond will also be investing in the **Center for Employment and Training** to provide accredited and certified training to underserved and hard-to-serve clients in high-growth, livable wage industries.

Also, a new **eEquip Richmond mobile app** will be custom-designed to connect all project partners, clients, businesses and services into a one-stop shop for economically uplifting the community and residents. One part of the app will connect residents to supportive services throughout the area.

“The mobile app technology will revolutionize the way in which agencies deliver services and interact with clients, and the way residents access jobs, services and Richmond resources,” said Andrea Bailey, community engagement manager with Chevron Richmond. “We are currently working with a company that is developing the salesforce community and implementation platform between the mobile app and all of eEquip project partners.”





