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## **Richmond Wins \$2M Grant to Turn Blighted Playlot into a ‘Neighborhood Jewel’**

**Richmond, CA, November 10, 2010**—The Elm Playlot, a badly underutilized half-acre park in the heart of Richmond’s rough Iron Triangle, is about to be transformed.

The city, in partnership with Pogo Park, a local nonprofit organization, won a state grant of nearly \$2 million this week to expand and revitalize this playlot. The money is part of \$184 million in Proposition 84 funds awarded by California State Parks in the first round of a fierce competition with more than 475 applicants. Richmond’s project was one of just 62 winners statewide.

Elm Playlot has seen few children in recent years, as trash, graffiti, and drug use associated with nearby abandoned houses kept kids and families away. Yet more than 3,400 children ages 0 to 11 live in the neighborhood.

And the park has “good bones,” according to Pogo Park’s Executive Director Toody Maher: “Five magnificent old sycamore trees that provide shade and habitat for wild birds, and precious open space in an area of densely packed houses. Elm Playlot can become a green oasis, a neighborhood jewel.”

The new Elm Playlot will have child-size play houses in a “global village,” a rock cave, a picnic area, a tot lot with water and sand, a trike path that winds around the park, an arts and crafts area, benches and tables for board games, an office, a restroom, and a taco stand to serve affordable, healthy snacks.

The plan for the park was created over a period of two years with the active participation of nearly 500 local residents at public meetings. A core group of residents designed the layout for the park and then built a scale model by hand at Scientific Art Studio, a local business that donated space and expertise.

“Finally,” says Maher, a Richmond resident who is passionate about children’s play, “the children of the Iron Triangle will have an everyday place to go and play outside that is safe, stimulating, and soulful. The new Elm Playlot will have a trained ‘playworker’ who will provide the fullest range of play opportunities to spark children’s individual development.”

The project is also designed to act as a catalyst for change in a neighborhood struggling with the effects of violent crime, blight, and lack of jobs. City officials regard the renovation of Elm Playlot as a “spotlight project,” with all municipal departments coordinating their efforts to rebuild the park and the surrounding community.

“This grant will help us revitalize the Iron Triangle and improve the lives of its children and families,” says Richmond Mayor Gayle McLaughlin. “Pogo Park can become a new model for improving our parks in neighborhoods throughout the city.”

“It is the exemplary efforts of community organizations such as Pogo Park and citizens like Toody Maher and the neighbors of Elm Playlot that clearly demonstrate the deep commitment in this city to equity and the empowerment of its residents,” says Dr. Connie Portero, chair of the Richmond Recreation and Parks Commission.

Neighborhood residents are thrilled. “Pogo Park, for us, is a bright beginning,” says Carmen Lee, a lifelong Iron Triangle resident, grandmother, and member of the Elm Playlot Action Committee. “This new park will be an oasis for our kids and our community. Finally our voice has been heard and our prayers have been answered.”

The total cost of the renovation project will be more than \$2.1 million. The \$1.94 million in Prop 84 funds will be supplemented by \$127,000 from the City of Richmond, \$45,000 from The California Endowment, and \$10,000 from First 5 Contra Costa.

“The revitalization of Elm Playlot is in many ways symbolic of the transformation of Richmond into a community where all children are healthy, safe, and ready to learn,” says Diane Aranda, program manager for The California Endowment. “The Endowment’s Building Healthy Communities program will work alongside residents, community organizations like Pogo Park, and city leaders to create safe and stimulating places for kids to play throughout the city.”

MIG, the Berkeley-based planning and design firm, wrote the grant for the city. MIG co-founder, Susan Goltsman, an expert on the design of play environments for children, youth, and families is also helping to guide the project.

Planning grants for the project came from the S. D. Bechtel, Jr., Foundation, Kaiser Permanente, Schroeder Family Fund, Chevron, East Bay Community Foundation, Stewardship Council, Capital Group, Trio Foundation, SunPower, Phalarope Foundation, and S. H. Cowell Foundation.

Pogo Park’s Toody Maher and Richmond City Manager Bill Lindsay have high hopes for Elm Playlot becoming a regional and national model for community restoration. Maher sees Elm Playlot as a “physical and methodological hub,” a catalyst for connections among organizations that share the mission of creating “youth-friendly, resident-driven, green-focused, and healthy community resources.”

The Pogo Park model, says Maher, “is the hallmark of a new wave of community development and revitalization projects being developed across the country, a powerful combination of integrated social, behavioral, economic, and individual interventions and effects.”

For more information about the project, see [pogopark.org](http://pogopark.org) or e-mail Toody Maher at [toody@pogopark.org](mailto:toody@pogopark.org).