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FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Richmond’s Greenway Plan Wins \$5M State Grant, Clearing Path to a Healthier Community

Richmond, CA, June 21, 2012—The City of Richmond has won a \$5 million grant from the California State Parks with its proposal to transform an old railway right-of-way into a vibrant center of outdoor community life called Unity Park. The project was one of just 64 winners of a statewide competition with more than 400 proposals, and what really set it apart from the others was the level of local participation in creating a vision for the new park.

“As far as the state was concerned, our model of community outreach and involvement was the gold standard,” says Toody Maher, director of Richmond’s Pogo Park group, which spearheaded the effort. “They told us that no other project came close.”

In fact, more than 1,000 people who live near the proposed greenway park took part in the planning, which involved extensive surveys, hands-on design workshops, and daily online video reports by local young people who interviewed residents about their ideas and hopes.

Paul Shain, director of Richmond Youth Media Productions, was shocked when Maher first came to him with a plan to mobilize the community and get the grant proposal done. “My jaw dropped when I heard the timeline,” says Shain. “We had six weeks to do everything. But Toody put that project on her shoulders and single-handedly made it happen. She was the only person in Richmond who could have done it.”

Maher was already expert at community park planning, having organized nearly 500 residents of the Iron Triangle to create a plan for remaking the Elm Playlot—a project that won a major grant in the first round of the California State Parks competition for Prop 84 funds in 2010.

This time she knew exactly what needed to be done. “We worked from the bottom up, helping the people in the neighborhood to envision what could be in that space,” says Maher. “We set up two ‘design tents’ with an array of possibilities, and had them staffed all day for eight straight days. There was food, music, even horses and ponies for the kids to ride. Artists collected input from the local people and drew pictures of their ideas and suggestions.”

A team of advocates for seniors took on the work of surveying community elders. “A lot of the vision was based on what the seniors told us—have plenty of trees for shade, separate the bike and walking paths, and so on,” says Maher.

The old right-of-way has long been eyed as a greenway with the potential to change radically the quality of life in the neighborhoods it crosses. The old Santa Fe Railroad corridor divides Central Richmond, known as the Iron Triangle, from South Richmond, both areas plagued by urban decay, gang violence, and a lack of safe outdoor spaces for recreation and community activities.

The winning proposal for Unity Park includes construction of a new community plaza, a children's play area, a gazebo, a "great lawn" for large-scale open-air events, community gardens, public art, biking and walking paths, restrooms, lighting, and landscaping.

Maher coordinated the participation not just of local residents but of more than 50 city agencies, nonprofit groups, and businesses. She secured pro bono consulting from MIG, the Berkeley-based planning and design firm, and its principal Susan Goltsman, an expert on the design of play environments for children, youth, and families. MIG took the lead in writing the Proposition 84 grant for the city.

Maher took on this effort for just one reason—she is passionate about the importance of play for children's healthy development, and she believes that the transformation of unused outdoor urban spaces into safe, green, vibrant playgrounds and parks is the key to improving not just children's health but the health of whole communities.

"We all need to come together to make this happen," she says, "for the sake of our children's future. They need to be outdoors, running and playing, using their minds, bodies, and imaginations, not stuck inside in front of a screen. Unity Park is a project that will make a real difference, and that we can all feel proud of."