

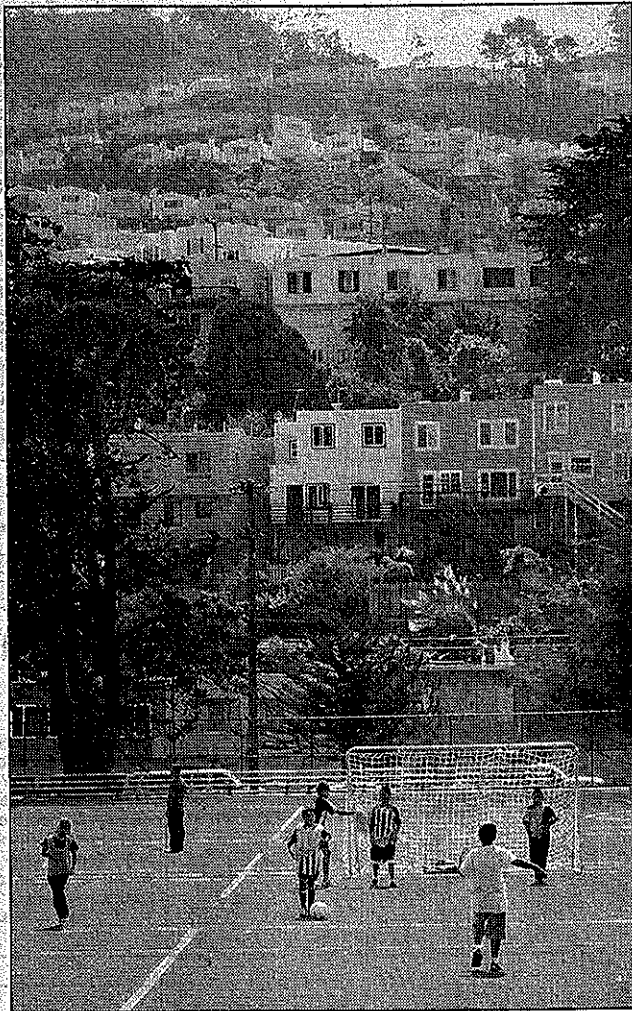
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KATY RADDATZ / The Chronicle

Parks are our backyard

By Jared Blumenfeld

It's 4 p.m. Do you know where your kids are playing soccer, football, baseball, lacrosse?

If your children participate in outdoor school sports in San Francisco, they probably are at an athletic field managed by the Recreation and Parks Department.

The same goes for younger kids playing in after-school programs. On any given autumn weekday afternoon, nearly 4,000 school-age kids are using the city's playing fields.

As the stewards of San Francisco's public playing fields and open spaces, Recreation and Parks has a responsibility to all the kids who don't have backyards, who don't have ball fields at their schools, who don't have the same athletic opportunities that kids in surrounding communities enjoy.

Yet some park neighbors have questioned whether youth teams should have first dibs on athletic fields in city parks. Some go so far as to oppose renovations, a move that prevents more kids from using their neighborhood parks for after-school sports.

At the Recreation and Parks, we face the challenge of balancing competing

needs with a limited supply of play space. We've made a commitment to provide athletic facilities for every child who wants to play. To honor this pledge, San Francisco has a long-standing policy of giving local schools first access to athletic fields, followed by youth programs run by park recreation staff, and then not-for-profit youth leagues and programs for city residents, including the Police Activities League, Bay Area Scores, Viking Soccer, Catholic Charities, Jamestown Community Center, SF Youth Baseball, and Mission Youth Soccer.

But the bottom line is that we simply don't have enough athletic fields. According to a 2004 independent recreation assessment, San Francisco would need 33 more soccer fields and 27 more baseball/softball fields just to meet demand.

But how do we add fields in our landlocked city? Our best opportunity is to get more use out of our existing fields.

Recreation and Parks has teamed up with the nonprofit City Fields Foundation to create more spaces for kids to play ball.

First, we've increased play capacity by installing synthetic turf and lights at high-use athletic fields. Depending on a field's condition, these renovations can triple the amount of play on an athletic field. We've also been able to add entire fields by redesigning the layout at multifield parks. By increasing use at these select parks, we simultaneously reduce

demand at other parks and allow grass fields more time for rest and re-growth.

Second, Recreation and Parks reorganized the way it issues permits. All requests are now made online. The time set aside for youth use has been expanded. Fields are allocated in advance at the beginning of the season. Every team knows who is using what field at what time each day. We've also established procedures to ensure that kids who live in the city get field access, and that youth leagues and programs are low-cost and primarily run by volunteers.

To make sure residents can still use their local fields for a pick-up game, open play time has been set aside at the busiest parks and signs are being installed to make sure people know when the fields are available for walk-on play.

Some San Franciscans are fond of our city's overgrown and quiet athletic fields. However gophers, years of heavy use, poor irrigation and seasonal rain often make these fields unsafe or unplayable. But as a community, we need to recognize that an empty athletic field is an under-utilized asset for our community and our children.

Think back to your own childhood. Were you playing ball after school? Shouldn't today's kids have that same opportunity?

Jared Blumenfeld is the interim general manager of San Francisco Recreation and Parks and director of the San Francisco Department of the Environment.