CHAPTER 9: FOSTER PARK

FIGURE 9.1 *Foster Park, day-use area.*

Existing Conditions

THE PARK

Foster Park is at the northern tip of the proposed parkway and directly east of Highway 33. The park, which is over 200 acres in area (Lubin 2008), was first developed in 1906 on land donated to the county by the well-known Ventura conservationist and benefactor, E.P. Foster. The majority of the park lies on steep hillsides to the west of the river, an area characterized by oak forests and abundant native vegetation. This area features hiking trails, an amphitheater dating back to the depression-era Works Progress Administration, traditional campsites, and more recently, eleven RV campsites. Below, at the riverside adjacent to Highway 33, a day-use area offers picnic sites and easy visitor access to the river itself.

This project does not address the hillside area of the park. Rather, it envisions an enhancement of the park's riverside day-use facilities that would attract more visitors as well as provide a visible introduction to the Lower Ventura River and the proposed parkway at its northern end.

THE SITE

The day-use area, which is just under two acres (Lubin 2008), is characterized by sycamore trees, grassy swaths, and the Ventura River. Here, under ordinary (non-flood) conditions, the river consists of two large channels surrounded by a floodplain covered with cobbles, boulders and sparse vegetation, easily approached by visitors. This area includes rest rooms, picnic facilities, and a large group barbecue pit which, according to a sign posted on it, must be reserved for use. The meeting point between the Ventura River trail and the Ojai Valley trail flanks the eastern edge of the site, separated from the day use area by a short wooden fence. The authors' visits to Foster Park revealed a charming but apparently underused park resource. Though visually appealing, the day-use portion of Foster Park feels neglected and has limited activity generators to draw people. Reinforcing the neglected air, the park has also had problems with graffiti and vandalism in the past (Hadly 2008). The only entrance to the park is off the street and does not easily accommodate pedestrians or cyclists.

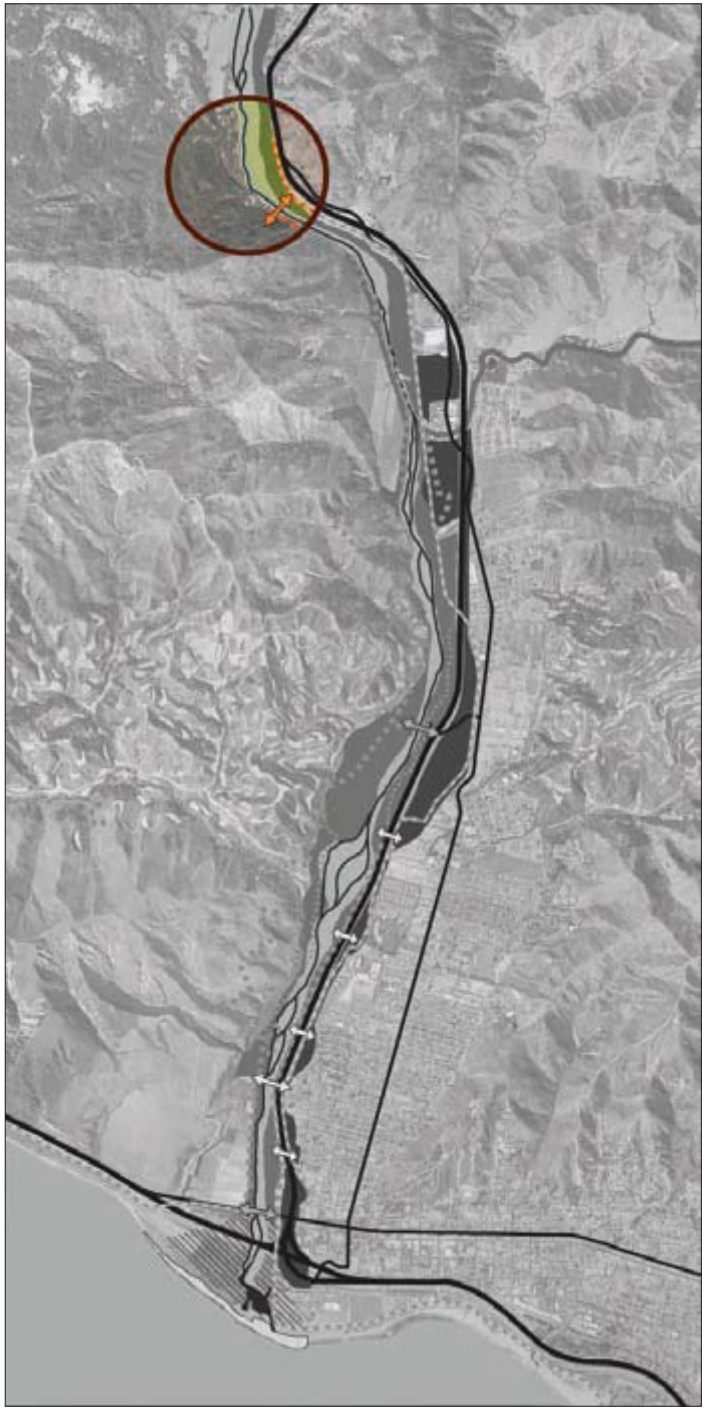


FIGURE 9.2 *Foster Park, located at the northern tip of the proposed parkway. Orthophotography: CIRGIS.*

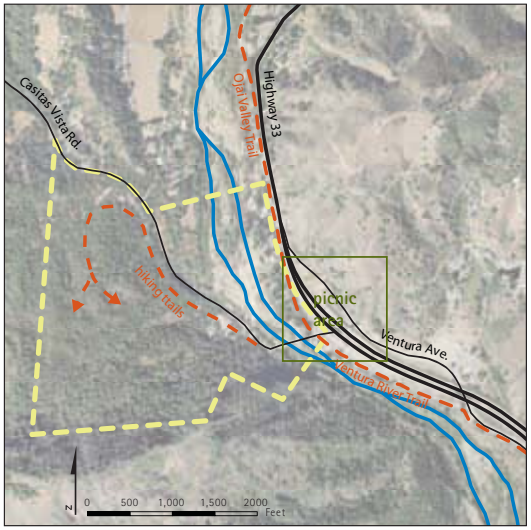


FIGURE 9.3 *Foster Park. Orthophotography: CIRGIS.*

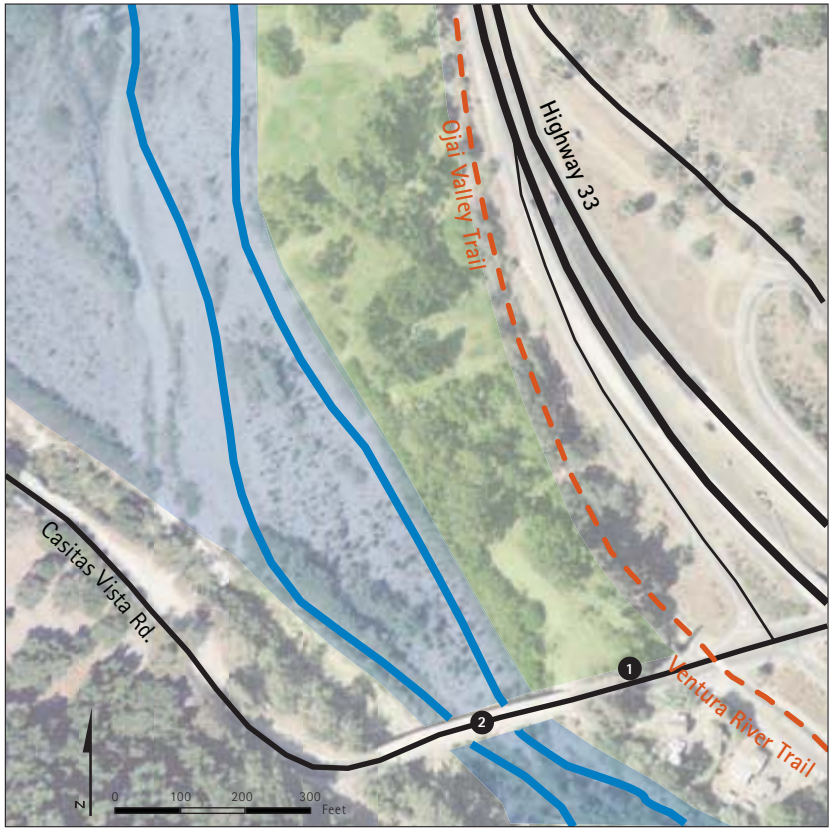


FIGURE 9.4 *Foster Park day-use area. Orthophotography: CIRGIS.*

FIGURE 9.5 *Foster Park trail among native oak trees.*

FIGURE 9.6 *Entrance tribute to E.P. and Orpha Foster.*

FIGURE 9.7 *Ventura River at Foster Park day-use area.*

Design Concepts

THE PLAN

This Vision Plan recommends expanded amenities to encourage further use of Foster Park, including the creation of a seasonal swimming hole in the Ventura River, two access points from the Ojai Valley trail, a tot lot, improved picnic and rest room facilities, a sun deck, an informational kiosk, and signage on Highway 33 announcing the beginning of the Lower Ventura River Parkway. In addition to the new amenities, the suspension of existing day-use fees would encourage more visitors to stop for at least a quick look and an introduction to the parkway, while the more visible presence of a Park Warden would encourage those visitors to stay longer. These improvements are intended to increase recreational opportunities, generate activities, increase the perception of safety, and reinforce for visitors the significance of the park both as an historical setting for Ventura residents and as the gateway to the lower river.

SAFE, ACTIVE, MEANINGFUL PLACE

Research regarding the relationship between design, behavior, and the built environment has shown that there are common reasons for underuse of public facilities. These reasons include concern for personal safety due to actual and perceived risk, a lack of activity generators, and/or a lack of a sense of meaningful place (Ramanujam 2006; Luymes and Tamminga 1995; Schroeder 1984; Appleton 1975; Jacobs1961). Perceived danger influences behavior

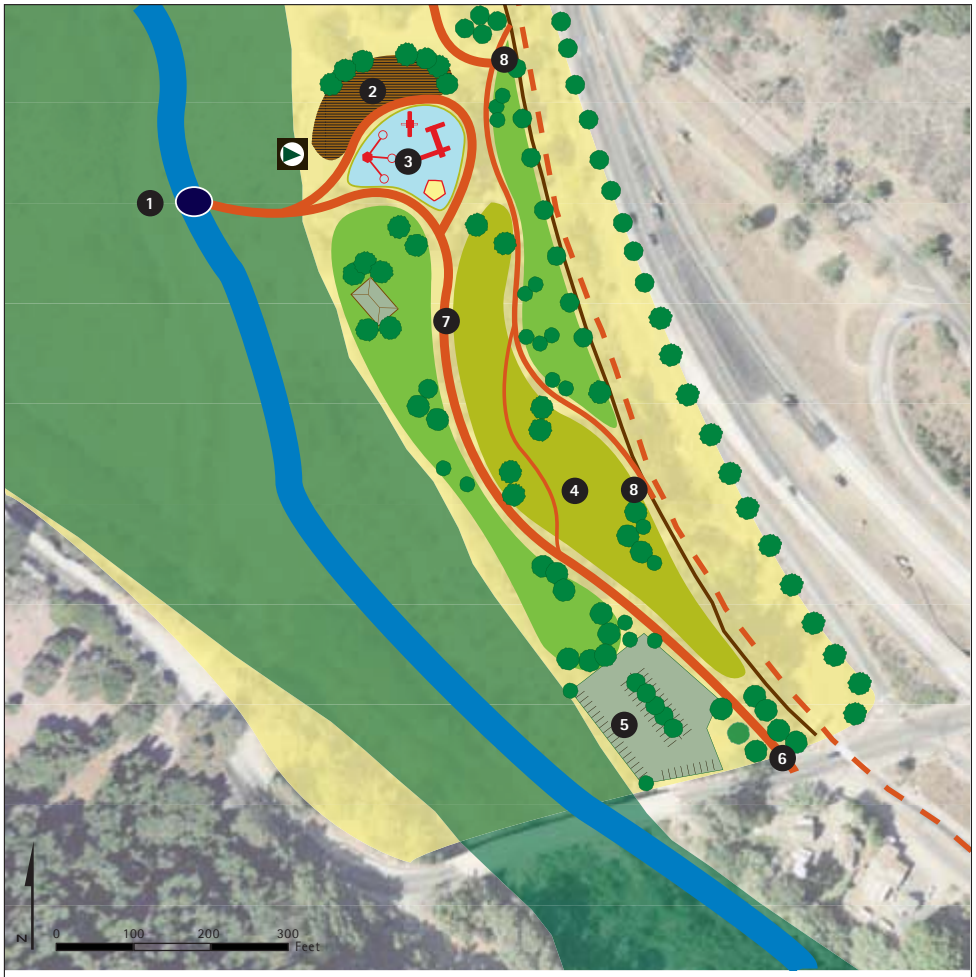


FIGURE 9.8 Proposed design for riverside day-use area, showing new features.

FIGURE 9.9 *North facing perspective of swimming hole and 'Swimming is open!' flag.*

and can cause people to avoid places they associate with risk (Ramanujan 2006). Understanding these fears can guide design choices that can aid in improving perceptions. Actual or perceived factors affecting the perception of safety include:

- Prospect: the ability to see one's surroundings clearly and appraise and recognize strangers (Appleton 1975)
- Refuge: the ability to reach safety, including be seen by others who may assist or defuse a threatening situation (Appleton 1975)
- Choice and control: the ability to avoid isolated or entrapment places, or socially uncomfortable situations (Luymes and Tamminga 1995)
- Environmental awareness and legibility: the ability to locate one's self in the surrounding environment and to understand and find one's way through a landscape without becoming confused or lost (Luymes and Tamminga 1995)
- Solitude without isolation: "places where it is possible to achieve solitude and retreat without leaving the public realm" where "a person knows where he or she is in relation to the surroundings and has control over the immediate environment and the ability to escape threatening situations" (Luymes and Tamminga 1995).

Use of public space tends to lead to more use (Whyte 1988; Carr et al. 1992; Luymes and Tamminga 1995). Activity generators that draw people to public spaces tend to improve the perception of safety by increasing visibility by others and by promoting a sense of care and ownership by the community that uses the resource. Activities that draw people are perhaps more important than physical design in enhancing real and perceived safety from the threat of crime (Luymes and Tamminga 1995).

Meaningful spaces are spaces that allow people to make connections between the places, their personal lives, and the larger world (Ramanujam 2005). Meaning is created when people use, interact with, and become familiar with a space, forming associations that accumulate over time (Treib 1995).

HISTORICAL SWIMMING HOLE

A swimming hole on the Lower Ventura River could be a key point of attraction for the proposed parkway, providing a tactile experience of the river to the delight of residents and visitors that connects them with Ventura's past.

This concept has historical precedents. Community workshops revealed that older local residents have fond memories of swimming in the Ventura River.

In fact, during each summer in the early years of the 20th century, the county forester built a rock dam across the river at Foster Park to form a free swimming hole for visitors, as instructed by E. P. Foster (Percy 1976).

Foster Park, with existing day use facilities and easy river access, would be an ideal location for a pool. When river conditions permit, boulders could be arranged by Parks Department staff in order to catch a portion of the river water and create a public swimming hole. Iconic flags located both at Foster Park and in downtown would announce when the swimming hole is open, enhancing the community's sense of connection to the river and symbolically linking downtown and Foster Park. An adjacent sun deck, tot lot, and fitness area would combine with the swimming activity to make this picnic area a highly attractive destination in fair weather. Along with the swimming flag, new signage on Highway 33 would make the park more visible. Visitors drawn to these activities would be introduced to the Ventura River as well as the parkway at an informational kiosk staffed by volunteers. Cyclists on the adjacent Ojai Valley Trail would be less likely to overlook this park because bike path openings and signage would invite them into the day-use area.

Creating a river pool at Foster Park would require overcoming several practical challenges. First of all, the City of Ventura extracts drinking water from the Ventura River at Foster Park. This water is important to Ventura and is directly related to the City's success in avoiding the unsustainable practice of importing water from other watersheds. A swimming hole would have to be located so as to avoid any negative impact on the quality of water received by the city; this might require locating the pool downstream from the city's wellfields. Similarly, swimming activities would need to planned in a manner that would avoid any negative impacts on wildlife in general, and listed species in particular, in the area. Third, in 2011 the city will begin construction of spur dikes and other measures for the protection and restoration of the riverbanks at Foster Park; a pool in the river or connected to the river would need to be planned in a manner that would make it consistent with those alterations. Finally, a pool would require funding for safety, supervision and maintenance service beyond that which would be required for a day use area without swimming.

Resolving these obstacles would require engineering and feasibility studies beyond the scope of this document, but there are several alternatives to consider. A pool might be located downstream from the city's wellfields, but still within Foster Park or close enough to it to be easily accessible by park visitors. If location at Foster Park is not feasible, then other locations in the proposed parkway area might be considered in the context of long-term parkway planning. In this respect, it is relevant that the Regional Water Quality Control Board has designated contact water recreation as a beneficial use for the waters of the lower river throughout the parkway zone (CRWQCB-LA 2003). Finally, in the event that water quality or wildlife habitat considerations make an instream swimming hole infeasible, planners might work around these difficulties by channelling a limited amount of river water into a constructed pool (with boulders, gravel, and other natural features) that is adjacent to the river, then treating the water that exits the pool through filtration or other means before returning it to the river or using it for groundwater recharge purposes.

GATEWAY TO THE PARKWAY

Announcing the River

Foster Park would be the gateway to the parkway corridor for visitors from Ojai Valley and other locations to the north. For those visitors, awareness of the parkway and of the lower river itself will be critical to their access to the river, their recreational enjoyment of the parkway, and their sensitivity to the ecological lessons that the parkway can teach. Cyclists and pedestrians on the Ojai Valley Trail would become aware of these elements through appropriate signage at the new access point (spur trail) to Foster Park. In addition, the swimming flag adjacent to Highway 33 and the informational kiosk area inside the park would be easily visible from the trail.

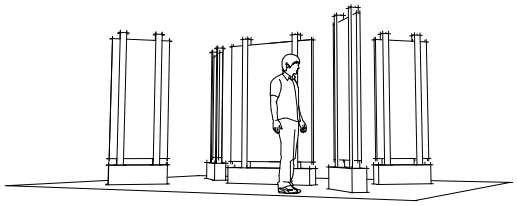
Highway 33 motorists entering the area at sixty miles per hour would have just seconds to become aware of the existence of Foster Park, the entry to the parkway, and the range of activities available within the next six miles. Motorists travelling at that speed have a limited range of vision that limits their reading of a highway sign to fifteen seconds or less (Watson 2003). Therefore, an announcement sign on the highway would have to be large and limited in content. However, even a quick view of the highway sign and the swimming flag would make visitors aware that a stop at the park would be valuable; then, the kiosk area inside the park would tell them the rest of what they need to know.

Informational Kiosk

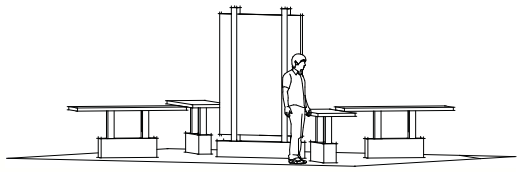
Parkway visitors would benefit from information about the hydrology and ecology of the Lower Ventura River, the status of projects and activities designed to enhance the river, the layout of the parkway and the locations and

[ABOVE AND RIGHT] FIGURE 9.10 *A modular informational kiosk area would be a flexible approach to facilitating different levels of staffing and activity at Foster Park. Permanent stone foundations could accept combinations of signs, benchs, activity tables or flat displays, and shade structures on matching support columns.*

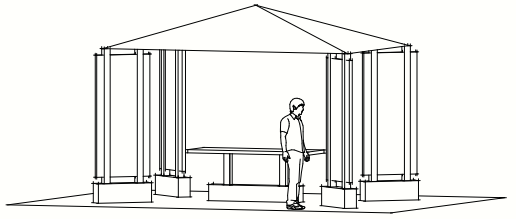
1. Permanent foundations accept multiple fixtures.



2. All vertical displays.



3. Activity tables or flat displays.



4. Vertical displays, table, and tent structure.

activities that might interest them within the parkway.

Information could be provided through a variety of installations, enclosed or open, staffed or not staffed, designed for passive or interactive viewing. Figure 9.10 illustrates a modular kiosk system consisting of a hardscape area with five low stone foundations designed to receive signposts, benches, activity tables, flat displays or supports for an overhead tent structure. At times, the kiosk could be simply a series of signs, either with or without a shade structure. However, when paid or volunteer staff are available, the kiosk could convert to activity tables for natural history demonstrations or craft activities. All of the components would be small enough to be transported with typical park utility vehicles and stored nearby.

ON-SITE STEWARD

All of the ideas discussed above — considerations of prospect, refuge and safety, the potential for expanded activities, and the value of Foster Park as a gateway for orientation to the lower river — indicate that a residential on-site steward would be a valuable addition to the park.

CONCLUSION

The features discussed in this chapter would encourage a greater visitor presence and activity level in the section of Foster Park between the river and the highway, improve perceptions of safety, and contribute to an experience of place that has historical roots in the early years of the 20th century. In addition, these improvements would address the importance of the park as a gateway and orientation place for parkway visitors.