



Reimagining the Griffith Park Pony Rides Site

Focus Group Meetings: Summary of Key Takeaways

Introduction

A series of six focus group meetings were held with a variety of community organizations in September and October of 2023. The groups provided their insights about the future use of the Pony Rides site. Below is a summary of notes about what participants shared during these focus groups meetings. These serve as high level reporting out of ideas shared, and do not represent direct transcriptions of conversations, and do not represent any formal recommendations of the focus group participants or opinions held by RAP or PlaceWorks.

Each group was asked the same set of questions:

- What do you/your group believe to be the biggest opportunities for reuse of the site moving forward?
- Who do you/your group feel the audience to be served should be?
- What uses would you/your group recommend for reuse on the site?
- What do you/your group feel are the biggest considerations or lessons learned should be kept in mind for future uses?
- Are there other groups/audiences that we should be reaching out to?
- What other things would you like to share with RAP as we move forward in this process?

Key Takeaways from Focus Group Meetings

LA Equestrian Coalition Meeting

September 1, 2023

- Key Considerations
 - Vital community benefit
 - Care for ponies comes first (animal welfare)
 - Educational, therapeutic, mental health, and social/emotional benefits of human-animal interaction
 - Multicultural and multilingual priorities (specifically low-income communities of color)
- Ideas Shared
 - “Children’s Gold-Standard Pony Experience” concept
 - Include educational components (possibly while waiting in the line to enter)
 - Create facilities for special needs/neurodivergent park goers (read aloud to a horse, non-judgmental audience)
 - Large thermometer to measure when ponies can/cannot work
 - Consider use of composite rubber flooring, shade structure over entire area (also required by law to address heat and climate change)
 - Underwriting for an endowment/trust and equestrian licensing fund
 - Murals, shade sails, color, art
- General

- Didn't go wrong, but in operation for 75 years and just didn't evolve
- Needed checks and balances on processes (upgrade from physical tracking to computer, etc.)
- Nowhere you can take toddler (1-2 years) that is animal-specific
- There is an opportunity to create multilingual educational exhibits for patrons waiting in line
- Equus Outreach program as model
- Programming for at-risk teens
- Ensure consistent oversight of concessionaires (cleanliness and service)
 - Examples (Las Vegas, San Bernardino County, Ventura)
- Undocumented families may not be willing to fill out a survey but are a big user group
- Equestrian community can fundraise

LA Equine Advisory Committee

September 11, 2023

- Key Considerations
 - Reposition and reimagine; not just as entertainment
 - Mission – demonstrating and teaching about animal welfare
 - Recommend the “5 domains system” of animal welfare assessment.
 - Use the site to demonstrate and teach exceptional care.
 - Therapeutic benefits (especially neurodivergent youth)
 - Pony and Petting Zoo
 - Consider pony demonstrations: ferries, braids for shows, etc.
- Ideas Shared
 - Include history, STEAM opportunities: evolution, ecology, animal classification, etc. in educational component.
 - Care and health records need to be transparent
 - There are different standards of care in the equine community, including the appropriate methods to feed animals, that should be further explored
 - Cost to use is important (private lessons can be \$80 per hour vs. \$5 pony ride)
 - Want a safe venue “no-bullying zone”
 - 3rd party veterinarian spot checks
- General
 - Concrete, pavement-based activities don't support Griffith J. Griffith's vision
 - Human/animal interaction can help with empathy, patience, motor skills and balance
 - Minimum standards of care are legal federal/state minimum standards. Most horse owners care for their horses better than the minimum standard: beyond the minimum standards, there are "Gold Standards"
 - Not just “ponies in circles” – housed safely, interactions benefit animals and users
 - Often serve as entry point/first step to becoming an equestrian
 - Include choice, behavioral enrichment
 - See “Taking Reins” as a good example of inner-city enrichment program with a good track record

Friends of Griffith Park & Griffith J. Griffith Trust

September 20, 2023

- Key Considerations
 - Would like state-of-the-art equestrian experience with riding and improved oversight (Friends & Trust support this)
 - How to care for ponies
 - Attendants better educated about children's safety
 - Backyard stable (also for therapy)
 - Should contain educational components
 - Multicultural significance for various local communities with equestrian traditions
 - Maintain consistency with Griffith's vision for urban wilderness
 - Equestrian tradition important to members of Latino and Black communities
- Ideas Shared
 - Encourage unannounced vet visits
 - Create a safe venue where people can enjoy equestrian activities without judgement
- General
 - Group feels that Griffith Park Vision (2014) was not a good document
 - Commercialization of the park
 - Re-wrote the master plan (urban wilderness)
 - Would like state of the art equestrian experience
 - Pony rides are many kids' first introduction to Griffith Park; as they get bigger they evolve into hiking and other activities
 - Riding/volunteer opportunities for school kids
 - Picnic in place, hikers, walkers, and baby strollers still have space
 - There are few areas in Los Angeles where you can put child on an animal for a brief period of time
 - Lengthy queue lines demonstrated that it was a popular attraction
 - Would like trees/shade

Griffith Park Advisory Board (GPAB)

September 9, 2023

- Key Considerations
 - Compassion towards animals
 - Should have interaction with animals and horses specifically
 - Not committed to riding horses, but to providing equestrian experience of some kind
 - Education should be central and incorporate all kinds of local animal life
 - Sanctuary ok – never ridden
 - Could help teach about disabilities (rescued animals with ongoing special care needs)
 - Should be Family-friendly. However, family-friendly generally means kid-centric, but we should consider other family formations. "Kid Centric" should also not exclude others (married, retired, etc.)
 - One of the main questions to answer is if there are ponies: To ride or not to ride?
- Ideas Shared

- Gentle Barn/Animal rescue (where animals are not ridden)
- Theme-park style attraction highlighting urban wildlife in the park
- Incorporate LA River (adjacent river access)
- Train ride needs to relate in some way
- “Adopt a Pony” – not committed to ride, committed to horses and children’s access to animals (Pony ride, Pan Pacific Park, goats, and chickens that people can feed)
- Missing opportunity: snakes, coyotes, hawks/raptor program (barn owls, coopers hawks, ground squirrels). History of P-22, education of native and domestic animals (example: raccoon eating cat food)
- Paint a pony, photography sessions, composting
- General
 - Against turnstile/pony sweep
 - Zoo expensive now, need to have a low-cost entry point
 - Indigenous people and histories are under-represented
 - Accountability and transparency are critical and desired by everyone
 - Journey of Water example from Epcot (imaginative, inclusive, not expensive)
 - If we had 100 ponies on site and just 40 giving rides, that would be ok. Some animals are domesticated to work, but the ponies did not have options. Should be that if the horse rejects, then they should be able to not give a ride that day. Problem was that the ponies were not treated well enough

Animal Advocates Meeting

October 17, 2023

Attending: Representatives from Los Angeles Alliance for Animals, In Defense of Animals, Animal Legal Defense Fund, and PETA

- Key Considerations
 - A non-animal model is preferred
 - There is no animal entertainment model that is humane. There are problems intrinsic to the model no matter the scale (business model benefits by number of rides given)
 - Animal exhibits are never a good idea because the needs of the animals will never come first
 - Animals in petting zoos live in a perpetual state of stress and are subjected to a constant barrage of strange noises and activities as many people try to touch them
 - Concern regarding zoonotic diseases; potential for transmissible diseases resulting from animal-human contact
 - Potential exposure of users to E. coli (see San Diego Fair) – is this a liability to the City?
- Ideas Shared
 - Who should use site: toddlers to 10 years of age
 - Something to do with kids on a Sunday such as:
 - Science/Reading Area
 - Archeology/dinosaurs
 - Arts and crafts
 - Planting Trees, Community Gardening, Pottery

- Pattern Wall
 - Ballet
 - Earthquake Testing
 - Mommy and me music interaction
- A reputable sanctuary puts the animals first. Have a specific window when animal ambassadors are visited, highly structured, animals have choices to engage or not. Advocates believe an animal sanctuary would not be possible at Griffith Park, where animals would be getting mobbed all day long, and therefore do not support this use in Griffith Park.
- Possibly explore expansion of Junior Ranger program (badges with educational programs, talk about animals in the park already such as owls and coyotes). See “agents of discovery” app.
- General
 - Animal exhibits are never a good idea; animal needs never come first and they teach children that it’s ok to confine them
 - Enforcement never happens; animal shelters are in crisis
 - No turnstiles – animals not happy walking in circles
 - Animals are in perpetual state of stress from everyone touching them
 - Takes a large amount of resources to manage effectively
 - Shared that a local Petting Zoo (seasonal) was under investigation for zoonotic pathogens and soil contamination
 - Concerns about equine cruelty, no water in heat, dirty water, pony lameness (from walking turnstile in same spot)
 - Examples referenced: Olympic Park, netting/shade structures in Encinitas Park (go above track)

Workshop: Friendship Auditorium Focus Group Notes

November 9, 2023

Attending: Community residents including members of the Los Feliz Improvement Association, Los Feliz Neighborhood Council, MAEVE Los Feliz, Hollywood Gifted Park

- Key Considerations
 - Attend to animals needs first and foremost
 - Animal-oriented history in Griffith Park (work horses, etc.)
 - Integration with train ride concession, history of trains as related to development of the area
 - Parents appreciate activities that offer supervised engagement for kids and allow them to take a break
 - Affordability is important
 - Rebuilding trust will be essential for any new concession
 - Opportunity to educate on food chain and farm-to-plate cycle, composting, etc.
 - Profit-driven businesses can compromise quality of life for the animals involved
 - Everyone is against the “pony-go-round”/turnstile

- Opportunity to partner with veterinary education ; veterinarians are in short supply and it's a field with serious minority underrepresentation. Exposure to animals at a young age is the #1 factor for entering the career path.
- Keep this area a natural environment and invest in more active uses in the riverside area of the park.
- "Reading to animals" programs
- Look at Underwood Family Farms (Thousand Oaks, apple picking, pumpkins), Lacy Park (ring to ride bicycles on a bike track), Sunset Stables – Paddock (Atwater) Irvine Park as models.
- Any pony experience needs a much larger number of ponies to ensure sufficient rotation and rest.
- One resident concerned about animal welfare (did not generally support animal-based uses) said that riding could potentially be ok if the animals came first, but does not believe that is possible in a for-profit business model.
- Any animal experience must be holistic; if riding is the only way kids interact with the animal, they don't learn to consider the animal's existence beyond riding it.
- Helmets and safety are important.
- Age – focused on elementary school (up to 11-12, not teens)
- Maybe Senior Center Partnership?
- Ideas Shared
 - No turnstile/sweep
 - Gentle Barn
 - Animal rescue/education center (until people get an opportunity to interact with animals, they don't understand them)
 - Equine/animal therapy center (with reading to animals)
 - Food lifecycle; farm to table (where does our food come from? This is how a farm works, how horses and cows are used, etc.)
 - Farm/garden with agricultural activities, fruit/vegetable picking
 - Zoo partnership/satellite area
 - Animal rehabilitation center with activities and education opportunities
 - Site with multiple nonprofit vendors operating different animal and wildlife education programs
 - Urban ecologist – hikes
 - Celebrate the biodiversity of Griffith Park – Wildlife rehab; bring in wildlife rescue site?
 - History around P22
 - Veterinarians? Gap medical access to pets? Partner with community colleges and expose kids to animals early on? Free vet care for low-income residents?
- General
 - This side of park is natural; better to support and enhance active recreation on the other side of the par
 - Potential for public private partnership and partnership with Autry Museum, indigenous peoples living history