

The Visitacion Valley Greenway

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— Jeanne Alexander

Established: 1999, Location: Leland Ave to Tioga Ave, Bus: #9 San Bruno; #56 Rutland; #15 Third, Contact: Fran Martin, 415-468 0639

Costanoan Indians were its earliest dwellers, but Franciscan friars made a wrong turn and named the valley. Traveling in a party of soldiers to San Francisco and lost in a heavy fog, they turned off the highway and when it cleared, they found a lovely valley. The discovery, on July 2, 1777, coincided with the Church's Feast of The Visitacion, so they christened it Visitacion Valley. It was a pasture for livestock from Mission Dolores and the Presidio until, as a Mexican land grant, in 1835 it was divided into parcels, and businesses started up. Residential development followed in 1905 when building sites could be purchased for \$125.00 – \$1.00 down and \$1.00 a week, but as late as the 1920s, the valley was still a pastoral outpost. Development over the next 50 years brought highways, low cost housing projects, immigrants from many countries, racial tensions, social problems and increased crime. The turnaround began when HUD (U.S. Dept. of Urban Development) demolished the projects and joined with City Hall and San Francisco State's Urban Institute to revitalize the area for the 24,628 residents of the diverse Italian, Latino, African American, Pacific Island and Asian community.

In the heart of Visitacion Valley, two women are turning a series of six publicly-owned vacant lots into a two-acre greenway. Opening on Leland Avenue's Hans Schiller Plaza in the business district, the Visitacion Valley Greenway winds up through the neighborhood to Tioga Avenue. "Three plots are basically finished, and three need capital improvement," says Fran Martin, co-founder with Anne Seeman, of Friends of Visitacion Valley Parks.

The Greenway Project crusade began in 1995. Working with the Trust for Public Land, they mounted an intensive lobbying campaign, speaking and gathering endorsements in the community, negotiating with the San Francisco Public Utilities Commission which owned the land, and the San Francisco Recreation and Park Department, to which it had to be transferred. Four years later the parties signed a Memorandum of Understanding stipulating that the infrastructure (pathways, irrigation and fencing) be completed by 2004 before RPD could take it over.

With funding from TPL and the Columbia Foundation in collaboration with VVGP, other grantors, and RPD, construction on Hans Schiller Plaza began in 2000. In March 2001 it opened. Behind the handsome steel gate, the walkway curves through the block where benches, grass, and mixed flower beds are bordered by walls inset with decorative broken tiles. The gate was designed by resident artist Jim Growden and the tiles by Fran Martin. The gates and tiles, along with pathways and fencing are recurring motifs to create visual unity throughout the Greenway. Trees surround the meadow in the Children's Play Garden, completed in 2004. A stunning panorama of city and water unfolds from the view bench at Campbell Street.

Recognition from the community has already begun. The Greenway received two San Francisco Beautiful Awards for Beautification for the Hans Schiller Plaza, the other for its role in design and construction of the RPD clubhouse. The Trust for Public Land has given its prestigious Lachman Soulage Award for leadership to Fran Martin and Anne Seeman.

However, the Greenway still awaits completion. Still under construction, the Agricultural Garden is missing vegetation and a gate at the top, plus some seating and trellises. The Herb Garden, Native Plant Garden and Community Garden are also incomplete. Unfortunately, RPD did not get the \$1 million state grant it applied for to complete these pieces, although Project Director Marvin Yee notes that there is \$1.1 million in Capital Fund for the native plant garden and he is considering beginning Phase One development.

"The Visitacion Valley Greenway is helping revitalize and beautify our long undeserved neighborhood," declares Fran. Her future planning includes an outdoor classroom that would partner with the California Academy of Science, other organizations, local schools and their after school programs. "The Greenway functions on many levels," she declares.

