



Marc Albert

Top: This young man was one of the first lucky users of the water table at Virginia/McGee Totland on Saturday. Above: No instruction manual was needed. Kids somehow instinctively knew what to do on the new play equipment.

Berkeley's tykes triumph in totland

Facilities at Berkeley Rose Garden also upgraded

By MARC ALBERT
Staff writer

Smiles abounded Saturday as parents celebrated the accomplishments of teamwork, and children busied themselves with that most important job, playing and having a blast.

Years of organizing, meetings, fund raising, planning and good old elbow grease were paid tribute in three different city parks as officials and citizens officially unveiled new improvements and gathered to plan new ones. Toddlers climbed poles, slid down slides and played in the sand at Thousand Oaks Park

and Virginia/McGee Totland, while those slightly older rolled up their sleeves and planted 100 ornamental bushes at the Berkeley Rose Garden.

All three projects showed the fruits of that rare commodity — cooperation. City parks improvement money could only cover basic bare bones. Generous Berkeleyans cheerfully chipped in the rest.

A mixture of city money, grass roots fundraising and volunteered community labor is remaking Berkeley parks. Gleaming new play structures meeting stringent new safety standards now grace Totland and Thousand Oaks Park.

Totland bathrooms are now wheelchair accessible. And the Berkeley Rose Garden is now more accessible to the physically challenged, and less accessible to mischievous deer foraging for a favorite fragrant snack. A wheelchair ramp was incorporated into a new entryway, and a high deer fence constructed.

A city study of Berkeley parks came to the shocking conclusion that a majority of children's play equipment was unsafe. In a litigious society, action was clearly required. The city could be held financially liable for every playground accident from a fall off a hazardous, playground slide or slip from an unsafe, see-saw.

But when money was made available for Totland, funding would barely cover federally required wheelchair accessibility. Authorities had the money to demolish old equipment, but were unable to pay for its replacement. Virginia/McGee "has always been a popular park, and we didn't want to mess with success, and we also didn't want to take things out without replacing them," explained Parks and Recreation Department Director Lisa Coronna.

Working with Berkeley Partners for Parks, a community based non-profit, citizens raised money, redesigned and reconstructed the

parks from the ground up. The Commission on Disability gave \$40,000 towards Virginia/McGee. Instead of just an accessible bathroom, much of the park's play structure is now accessible as well. Hanging bars are within reach of wheelchair users. Much of it was built without stairs.

100 juniper and ceanothus plants to stabilize a steep hillside. The community group Friends of the Berkeley Rose Garden raised \$12,000 for park improvements. The city paid for a new wheelchair accessible entrance; the old one was in poor repair.

But city money could only cover

'We didn't have to take a spot at the end of the line of all the tot lots the city is trying to renovate.'

—CHRIS SWETT, Thousand Oaks organizer

A water filled play table, new picnic tables, grass and concrete work were also put in at Virginia/McGee. All but one metal swing were replaced by rubber. And to protect the precious little ones, areas beneath the now lower structure are completely rubberized. "Even though the park is mostly for tots, we wanted to have extensions for older siblings — the park is really geared for kids five and under," said longtime neighbor and activist Julie Searle.

Thousand Oaks, where a daylighted creek gurgles nearby, park improvements include a similar play structure surrounded by a sandy lot. The improvements were handled by Partners for Parks, enabling an end run around the tangled web of municipal red tape. The city, school board and neighbors each chipped in a third of the financing. Because funding and work was donated, "We didn't have to take a spot at the end of the line of all the tot lots the city is trying to renovate," said Thousand Oaks organizer Chris Swett.

At the Berkeley Rose Garden on Saturday, 15 sturdy souls planted

bare bones cinder-block construction. Donated money paid for stucco and other amenities like new benches.

The newly constructed deer fence is keeping out most of the pesky critters. But some clever deer are sneaking in from the downhill side and feasting on flowers.

Mayor Shirley Dean was on hand to congratulate the spirit of volunteerism and donations that got the projects done. Dean was joined by Councilmember Diane Woolley at Thousand Oaks, and Linda Maio at Totland. But if parents and officials were thrilled to see their hard work pay off, for kids their job is just beginning. Squealing toddlers ran and jumped, laughed and frolicked with giant smiles.

Faces were painted, and hair thrown out of place by rides on slides and swings. Giant bubbles emerged from the new water table, popping just out of reach. Kids may not know the gargantuan efforts that went into park repairs, but they are certainly learning how to enjoy the fruits of that labor.