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OPINION // OPEN FORUM

It's time for a new People's Park

By Rigel Robinson, Lori Droste and Jesse Arreguín Feb. 3, 2020



People's Park demonstrators are confronted by National Guard troops on May 18, 1969. Some protesters would be arrested.

Photo: Jerry Telfer / The Chronicle 1969

In People's Park's 2.8 acres, there are countless stories. Stories that have shaped the history of Berkeley, and the progressive movement as we know it.

And in People's Park, there is also pain. The park was born in the face of callous government repression and abuse by Gov. Ronald Reagan's National Guard, and today perhaps no other plot of land in Berkeley so visibly and viscerally exemplifies the housing crisis that we face as a city and a region. In the shadow of mid-rise dormitories that house

Southside's growing student population, several dozen unhoused individuals of every walk of life depend on the park daily.

For many years, People's Park has been a sanctuary for the unhoused, but it can be more. The park has played various symbolic roles in the last 50 years, and today, it is time for it to play yet another — one that includes housing and support for the homeless, green open space that honors the park's history and dense student housing. We are committed to guiding that transition.

We do not take our decision to step forward and voice our support lightly. Attempts have been made to develop the park before, and they have failed, generally for good reason. However, the current plan that the campus is developing is a balanced one — one that meets the most critical needs of our community while simultaneously affirming the important legacy of People's Park. The university plans a three-pronged approach to the space: a state-of-the-art permanent supportive housing facility with as many as 125 units for homeless individuals, a new housing facility for up to 1,000 students and community open space and park amenities around the two facilities that will include a memorial to the legacy of the park.

People's Park would remain, both in form and spirit, a People's Park.

It is truly historic and unprecedented for a university to offer its land for the development of permanent supportive housing for the homeless. There is no greater demonstration of collaboration between town and gown, the city and the campus. The housing crisis is our greatest challenge, and a new facility with as many as 125 beds would represent a dramatic expansion of our supportive services capacity. This is an immense opportunity for our citywide efforts to not only help our homeless with the highest needs, but to contribute to our goal of reducing homelessness altogether. The year has only just begun, and already four homeless individuals have passed away on our streets. Lives are at stake, and we know that the most effective way we can combat homelessness is by building supportive housing.

The future we imagine at People's Park is a promising one, but the journey there will be full of challenges. Such a transformation of a historic space so treasured by the community demands a delicate and robust public process, a clear and well-defined displacement plan and significant investment to ensure a smooth transition. What will happen to the unhoused residents of the park while the space is under construction? How will the development impact neighboring residents, churches and businesses? Will activists who led the creation and preservation of People's Park be involved in planning the proposed

Over the next several months, the campus is hosting a series of open houses to collect public input on the proposed project, the first of which will be on Monday, Feb. 10, from 4 p.m. to 8 p.m. in the MLK Jr. Student Union Ballroom. We encourage you to attend to make your voice heard, and help the campus shape its approach to answering these important questions.

The legacy of People's Park for years has been one of resistance, of rising up to the defining challenges of our time. However, while we should be inspired and guided by the legacy of the '60s, we must not be constrained by it.

In 2020, we live in a Berkeley where more than 1,000 of our residents are homeless. In 2020, we live in a Berkeley facing such a severe student housing shortage that 10% of UC Berkeley students will experience homelessness. In 2020, we have the opportunity and a duty to meet these challenges head-on. We hope you will join us in advocating for a new People's Park, one with permanent supportive housing, student housing, and open space that honors its heritage.

Rigel Robinson and Lori Droste are Berkeley City Council members. Jesse Arreguín is the mayor of Berkeley.

