

Willow Springs Park in Long Beach 131 years in the making

First four acres of green space completed

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Willow Springs Park, the city's largest new space since 1952, is slowly taking shape as Long Beach builds it in pieces. (Brittany Murray / Staff Photographer)

Many had tried over the last century to make something usable out of California Gardens, a hilltop site in Long Beach festooned with oil derricks and even more history.

Forgotten by most of the public, the 47-acre property is perhaps best known for its spring, once surrounded by a willow forest, that was used as the first water source for Long Beach in 1882. Today, those two natural features can be seen in the names of the streets that border the land to the north and south.

Over the years, developers have tried to place an auto mall, racetrack and housing development there. A decade ago, a \$60 million plan to build a sports park fizzled.

The efforts ran into the same problems. Any project would most likely have to level the hills undulating across the property, account for the oil underfoot and deal with the on-site Newport-Inglewood fault, the progenitor of the 1933 Long Beach earthquake.

Considering the challenges and the long line of those who came and went before him, Councilman James Johnson could be forgiven for gloating as he recently showed off the first four acres of Willow Springs Park, the low-cost inner-city green space he has helped create from the old California Gardens.



Willow Spring Park's biggest advocate, Long Beach City Councilman James Johnson points out the seashells in the some of the land due to transplanting when the Long Beach marinas were built. (Brittany Murray / Staff Photographer)

But there was no hint of that, and Johnson displayed only the earnestness and passion for the project he has become known for since he was elected in 2010.

"Everyone when I came into office

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said it couldn't be done," Johnson said. "They told me that if it were easy it would have been done in the last 130 years.

"The attitude was, you're going to talk about it like the last 30 council members, and like the last 30, you're going to fail. "

The councilman then enthusiastically acted as a tour guide for the park, showing a one-acre urban farm, a county detention basin that a grant application may transform into a wetland and the park's crown jewel,

Longview Point, a plaza built at the highest point in the city.

Standing at Longview Point, visitors can see the region in a 50-mile radius, from

Santa Catalina Island to the San Gabriel Mountains. On a clear day, the Hollywood sign is visible. The sights are marked by a 100-foot, in-ground crushed granite and glass map made by local artist Steve Elicker that was unveiled last year.

It's a good spot on the Fourth of July - the park's next big event this year, Johnson noted.

"You can see 16 fireworks shows from here, from Torrance to Redondo Beach, to the Queen Mary, South L.A.," he said. "The thing I like about it is they pay for them and we watch them. "



Long Beach City Councilman James Johnson points out the seashells in the some of the land due to transplanting when the Long Beach marinas were built. (Brittany Murray / Staff Photographer)

The tenacity Johnson displayed getting Willow Springs Park off the ground - and now uses to champion its piece-by-piece expansion - has become a running joke among his fellow council members, with sly references to the earnest councilman and his pet park cropping up in meetings.

"It's with a lot of love," Vice Mayor Robert Garcia said of the ribbing. "He's a great colleague and a great person to work with. "

Garcia said the work done at Willow Springs by Johnson is impressive.

"It shows how committed he's to the community and he really believes in the potential of this park," Garcia said.

Signal Hill Mayor Larry Forester, whose city surrounds the park and benefits from it, agreed.

"My favorite saying about James is I'm glad you he was bullheaded enough to see this through," said Forester. "It just proves if you put your mind to it, things can be done. "

Eschewing credit, Johnson is quick thank Los Angeles County Supervisor Don Knabe, who arranged a \$250,000 grant to help the project, and Signal Hill Petroleum, which continues to operate oil pumps on the property, built fences and contributed other in-kind work. Signal Hill has also donated resources. Long Beach has spent \$197,740 to date on the project.

For now, Johnson said he is happy seeing the newly-established park, Long Beach's largest since 1952, slowly grow over time.

"It doesn't have to happen all under my watch or anything, but if I can go ahead and move this forward so the next council member and the council member can continue to improve it, that'd be great," said Johnson.

Willow Springs Park is located at 2745 Orange Ave.

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