



Friends of Griffith Park

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friendsofgriffithpark.org

January 10, 2023

Board of Recreation and Park Commission
Attn: President Sylvia Patsaouras
200 N. Spring Street
Los Angeles, CA 90012

Re: The abrupt and unexpected Pony Rides concession termination

Dear Commissioners,

In 1946, Los Angeles City Recreation and Parks Department (RAP) employee, young Tommy Taylor Wright, opened a low-budget pony rides operation in Lincoln Park, East Los Angeles, using ponies rented from an El Monte stable. He was then approached by RAP to start a pony ride concession in Griffith Park, and since 1947, this has been one of the most enduring, popular rides in the City's park system.

Along the way, Wright was able to take advantage of surplus Quonset huts that had been used in Griffith Park to house returning WWII veterans and families. These huts were turned into pony barns for his concession which became incredibly successful. Wright took great pride in his ponies, while also giving LA children the opportunity to enjoy a low-cost pony ride in the beautiful outdoors. Unfortunately, he retired in 1979, due to poor health.

Hank Bronk, a pony ride devotee, and his family took over the operation. He was trusted by both Wright and RAP. The Bronks continued to introduce children from all walks of life to the joys of a pony ride in the Park, even through hard times. RAP came to his aid to provide temporary liability coverage once, without an interruption in providing pony and carriage rides. The Griffith Park pony rides tradition continued, as concessionaire, Steven Weeks, next accepted the reins.

Until now.

The LA Historic-Cultural Monument #942 designates the Griffith Park Pony Rides as a contributing element for its City designation. Mapping shows the Pony Rides as item #4, Historically Sensitive Resource and Area. So what will become of Griffith Park if we don't respect and protect the core of its historic past?

Friends of Griffith Park Position:

1. FoGP is tasked with preserving the Park's natural and historic resources as its mission. The spirit and the entitlement set down by the Historic-Cultural Monument (HCM) would be violated by both a change of use for this area or, at least, by altering any structures named as contributing elements of the dedication. Specifically, *"The original fenced path for the Pony Rides, its waiting canopy and ticket kiosk are all still present and unaltered."* (HMC Application, 2008, Reference A below)

2. City Code Section 595, pertaining to Department of Recreation and Parks "Lease of Facilities" (See Reference B below) legalese essentially states that RAP is not obligated to lease the facility created in 1947. However, if they do lease it, the City is subject to limitations. If RAP is considering another use for the facility on a lease basis, they'd have to stay within the purposes for which it was built. The historic documentation makes it very clear: this facility was created for riding ponies.

These two facts offer either a dilemma or an opportunity. We prefer the latter, with a forward-thinking model that continues to include animals and the existing historic resources.

FoGP supports a commitment to continued use of this historic venue for the purpose for which it was built, pony rides, introducing children to animals and the equestrian world. Going forward, this could be achieved with a higher degree of sensitivity to animal care. This could become the compromise that benefits and satisfies all.

Of the consultations by Dr. Rachael Sachar, DVM, CVA, the December 8, 2021 report states that animals for hire involved in the movie and entertainment industry, under higher public scrutiny, are provided care beyond legal obligations. She goes on to suggest that RAP adopt similar policies and fulfill the higher standard in a transparent and continually reviewed manner. ([See linked, p. 6, GRIFFITH PARK PONY RIDES POLICIES AND PRACTICES REPORT.](#))

FoGP does not dispute that Steve Weeks gave excellent care to these ponies, many of them elderly. However, setting the gold standard as a condition of operation may allow this beloved, low-cost amenity to continue into the future with transparency. Pony rides could also be supplemented with other animal education and animal contact experiences, as before.

Equestrians are considered the original user-group of Griffith Park. Along with hikers, picnickers, bicyclists and others, their standing is upheld by *A Vision for Griffith Park* and its backing, defending existing and historic park users. Protecting the activities of user-groups was an early fundamental principle endorsed by the Griffith Park Master Plan Working Group, which led to the adoption of the Vision policy.

FoGP advocates for the humane treatment of animals, and hopes more important targets are considered by those activists who protested the Griffith Park pony rides. For example, FoGP has a ten-year record of educating people on the use of rodenticides, and we were successful in a Statewide effort for legislature, resulting in passage of AB 1788. Anticoagulant rodenticides cause a slow and agonizing death for animals that consume them directly; these poisons also travel up the food-chain to larger wildlife (e.g, bobcats, foxes, coyotes, and mountain lions) causing them the same senseless death sentence.

Throughout the last seven decades, the pony rides have provided an affordable opportunity for children from underserved communities to connect with animals, often for the first time. And a trip to Griffith Park for a pony ride is often the gateway for other experiences in the Park, such as hiking, picnicking, and appreciation of its nature.

We look to the Griffith Park equestrian community for their expertise and best advice to meet these above objections. FoGP supports a dialog with the Council District Office and RAP toward an acceptable continuance of activities utilizing the historic pony ride venue.

Our sincerest thank you,



Gerry Hans
President

About Friends of Griffith Park: Friends of Griffith Park (FoGP) is a California non-profit 501(c)(3) dedicated to preserving and protecting Griffith Park's natural habitat, biodiversity, and historic features, for current and future generations. FoGP is committed to ensuring that Griffith Park, a public park and Los Angeles' largest Historic-Cultural Monument, remain open, natural, and free to all citizens of Los Angeles.

Reference A:
CULTURAL HERITAGE COMMISSION
Historic-Cultural Monument Application, Page 14



Figure 17: Pony Rides, 1946. View N. Photo: ICF Jones & Stokes, August 2007

Due immediately east of this canopy is an oval-shaped pony track with wood plank fences. Due immediately west of the waiting canopy is a small, square-plan, single-story ticket kiosk with an asymmetrical, side-gabled roof (Figure 18).



Figure 18: Pony Rides Ticket Kiosk, c.1946. View NW. Photo: ICF Jones & Stokes. March 2008.

This kiosk features an open full-length ticket counter at its east elevation that is inset into a small porch supported by wood columns at its outer corners. The kiosk has a painted wood wainscot across the side and rear elevations, a door at its rear elevation, and a covered window at its south-side elevation. The gable ends are clad in scalloped vertical boards spaced slightly apart from one another. The service counter within this kiosk is covered by a pair of barn style board and batten shutters. The rear, west facing door of this kiosk also features this pattern upon its door. Immediately north of the waiting canopy and the pony track is a small, circular “pony-go-round” covered with a circular canvas canopy supporting a metal pipe framework. Just south of the waiting canopy and pony

Reference B – Los Angeles Municipal Code, Recreation and Parks:

Sec. 595. Lease of Facilities.

The Board of Recreation and Park Commissioners may lease for recreational purposes any municipal auditoriums, arenas, sports centers or related facilities subject to the following conditions:

- (a) The term of the lease shall not exceed 35 years. Leases in excess of five years shall be approved by the Council by ordinance.
- (b) The public must be entitled to use and enjoy the property or facility for the purposes for which it was acquired, constructed or completed and any lease shall require the lessee to operate the property or facility so as to furnish the public with that use and enjoyment.
- (c) The board may enter into the lease without inviting bids and may prescribe other terms and conditions as it deems appropriate.