

REPORT TO THE COMMUNITY



SANTA MONICA GREAT PARK COALITION

Greetings from the Santa Monica Great Park Coalition

Our coalition formed a year ago, to bring together the many groups and individuals who look forward to the conversion of the 192-acre Santa Monica Airport into a Great Park when the airport closes at the end of 2028.

Today, the Coalition includes more than 70 organizations representing more than 25,000 people, all dedicated to advancing community health, restoring green space and habitat, mitigating climate change, strengthening local sustainability and biodiversity, and creating vibrant recreation opportunities.

Progress toward the Great Park has been continuous. 2024 and 2025 were years of change and challenge in Santa Monica, with new leaders taking office, but nothing has stopped the park planning process.

A Year of Steady Progress

In 2024, the City began the Santa Monica Airport Conversion process. The City assembled an expert team of staff centered in the Public Works Department and hired one of the world's top planning firms, Sasaki, to consult. Following early community engagement in the spring, the team conducted an additional survey in fall 2024 to gauge public interest in the Great Park. The response was overwhelming, culminating in a December 2024 workshop that attracted more than 800 people, the largest turnout for a city planning workshop in living memory, reflecting the community's strong desire to participate in Great Park planning.

The Public Process and Unanimous Council Direction

Community responses overwhelmingly favored dedicating the land to a Great Park, and out of this broad public process emerged five guiding principles that the City Council unanimously adopted in January: *Start with Nature, Inspire Wonder, Balance Economics, Amplify Versatility, and Celebrate Place*. The Council then directed the planning team to return in July, after more public outreach, with three alternative scenarios showing possible long-term outcomes for the airport site.

Staff and Sasaki developed these scenarios over the spring, conducted additional public outreach, and presented them to the City Council in July. At its July 8 meeting, the Council voted to direct the SMAC team to develop a plan to be submitted for environmental review. Importantly, the Council directed that the plan be limited to park and recreation uses allowed by Measure LC, ensuring that no ballot measure would be required.

Measure LC is the ballot measure approved by 60 percent of Santa Monica voters in 2014, stating that if and when the airport closes, the land cannot be developed for anything other than parks and recreation purposes unless voters approve another plan.

The July meeting clarified another important point. The City Attorney informed the Council that amenities commonly incorporated into parks, such as restaurants and cafes, can be built as part of the park without violating Measure LC. This gives planners more flexibility in creating a park that will have wide appeal and adds possibilities for funding sources.

Phased Planning and Strategic Leadership

The Council also directed the planning team to plan for development of the Great Park over time and in phases. Funding sources can therefore be matched with specific features as they are built, rather than requiring all funding for the ultimate park to be in place on day one. This approach links clearly to the guiding principle *Balance Economics*, making the park's growth feasible and fiscally sound.

Just after the July meeting, Santa Monica welcomed its new City Manager, Oliver Chi. One of his first actions was to bring responsibility for Great Park planning into the City Manager's Office. The planning team will now report directly to him. This was a welcome recognition that building the Great Park will be a major civic achievement in Santa Monica, and a magnificent legacy that we will leave for future generations.

As we write this report, the planning team, under the City Manager's direction, is preparing a plan for public review and then Council consideration early in the new year. With Mr. Chi's community-minded leadership guiding this work, we look forward to the next steps. The Coalition will continue its steady advocacy for a Great Park that reflects community priorities.

A Path for Funding the Great Park

It's vital to understand how a new park can be funded, even during a period when the City is facing temporary operating deficits. Parks are not built with the City's annual operating budget. Instead, they are funded with capital funds, which come from a variety of sources, including local, regional, and federal grants, philanthropic donations, foundations, and nonprofit support organizations.

It is important to remember that the *most* expensive part of the Great Park, the land, is already paid for. Santa Monica purchased it in 1926 with a parks bond, a century-old decision that now offers our park-poor city a rare second chance to realize its original vision.

The airport generates millions each year in lease revenues. Although nearly all of this income originates from non-aviation businesses, all of the revenue goes into a separate Airport Fund that, under FAA regulations, the City may use only for airport operations. These funds do not enter the City's general operating budget. When the airport closes, the aviation leases and expenses will end as well, while non-aviation lease revenues will continue and new revenues will be added. At closure, these lease revenues will be available to the City, and at the same time the City will no longer have to pay for operation of the airport. The City can then place this income into a Park Fund to support construction and long term maintenance of the Great Park, and these revenues can also back revenue bonds for major features.

As plans develop, specific sources will be matched to specific park elements. The City will be able to phase construction, leverage grants, and partner with state, county, and community organizations to create a 192-acre Great Park that reflects Santa Monica's values and long term vision.

Health, Safety, and Economic Benefits

Countless local and regional studies show that parks greatly improve community health and resident well-being. A Great Park will also strengthen climate resilience through increased tree canopy, native landscapes, and green infrastructure that will cool surrounding areas, improve air quality, and capture stormwater, helping prepare our city for a hotter and more unpredictable climate. Our Great Park can play a crucial role in emergencies, by providing a water feature and open space for firefighting operations and helicopter landings. In addition, research consistently shows that the creation of a major park often leads to stronger economic activity in surrounding areas, increasing local business revenues, tourism spending, and overall commercial vitality. Our Great Park will deliver all these essential benefits and more, creating a healthier, safer, and more vital community.⁵

A Century in the Making

There are well-funded interests that want to keep the airport open. Others want to use the land for purposes other than a park. We should remember that closing the airport and returning it to park use is not a recent idea. This was the original location of Clover Field Park until the federal government took over the land at the start of World War II. Santa Monica has sought to close the airport since Douglas Aircraft closed its plant in 1975. In 1984 the City entered an agreement with the Federal Aviation Administration to close the airport in 2015, but the FAA reneged. After suing the federal government, the City obtained a new agreement in 2017. As allowed by that agreement, the City Council has voted to close the airport on December 31, 2028.

Looking Ahead

The Great Park Coalition exists to marshal the hopes of all who see the need for and the beauty of a Great Park for our city and our region. We will continue to inform the community of progress toward that goal. Thank you for your attention!

Scan the QR code or visit our GPC website to learn more about the Santa Monica Great Park Coalition and join us! www.greatparkcoalition.org

