

WPRAs first president helps city set Arroyo Seco natural policy through ‘visionary proposal’

Known as the Jenck’s resolution

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In October 1964, Pasadena City Director Richard W. Jencks made a visionary proposal to his fellow city directors: Treat the Arroyo Seco as a natural park. Jencks proposed not an expensive program, but a broad policy statement from the board of city directors (city council) to protect the natural canyon. It wasn’t a new idea. Jencks knew that.

At the board meeting, Jencks admitted that he was a “Johnny-come-lately” to Pasadena, but his fellow directors responded favorably to his plan right away. Director C. Lewis Edwards, a long-time Pasadena resident, praised Jencks for bringing the proposal to the board.

“Sometimes it takes a so-called Johnny-come-lately to view this natural beauty with a fresh eye and do something about it,” Edwards said. Floyd Gwinn stated “In this fast-moving age, we seem to have neglected the arroyo.”

Director C. Bernard Cooper, reminisced nostalgically about his boyhood experiences picnicking and swimming in the arroyo, as he enthusiastically endorsed Jencks’ proposal.

Jencks, a CBS television executive, had entered the Pasadena political scene several years earlier when he led the campaign against a Pasadena Planning Commission proposal to foster a dense high-rise development on the west side of Pasadena. Three 15-story apartment buildings were slated for comfortable neighborhoods that planners described as blighted. Most probably the planners’ real concern was the two-headed albatross on its way to Pasadena, the two freeways coming soon, the Long Beach Freeway coming up from the south and the cross-town Colorado

Freeway (now known as the 210 Freeway). Caltrans bulldozers would soon destroy 4,000 homes and businesses and threaten the financial stability of the city.

The high-rise controversy was a hard-fought battle that went to the voters in late 1961. Jencks and some determined neighborhood advocates organized a strong, grassroots campaign with massive turnout on the west side to win decisively. That campaign in 1961 was the genesis of the West Pasadena Residents Association (WPRAs) and the opening crusade of the historical preservation movement that rose to prominence in subsequent years to save Old Pasadena and help shape the Pasadena of today. The following year Jencks became the first president of the newly-incorporated WPRAs.

When the municipal election rolled around again in April 1963, Jencks and his grassroots army took on incumbent Grant Changstrom for the District 6 seat on the board of city directors. Directors in those days had to reside in their district, but the vote was city-wide. In what the editor of the *Star-News* described as “the hardest fought municipal election in history,” Jenck eked out a narrow victory over Changstrom, a realtor. Changstrom carried 55 precincts to Jencks’ 37, but, thanks to Jencks’ troops, the turnout on the westside was over 50% compared to 29.5% citywide.

In his initial plea for the arroyo on October 4, Jencks reminded the directors that the early settlers had viewed the arroyo as a natural park. He painted a picture of the early arroyo aglow with brilliant California poppies and other wildflowers and expressed his regret that the chemicals used to kill weeds had also destroyed the wildflowers that once graced the arroyo and the nearby foothills.

The articulate attorney compared the potential of the Arroyo Seco to Rock Creek Park in Washington DC and Golden Gate Park in San Francisco but lamented that in recent decades the arroyo had been developed piece-meal, including as a “final indignity” the flood control channel that had been constructed in the post-WWII era. He expressed the hope that check dams then



Richard Jencks, who passed away at age 93 in 2014

being considered by the Flood Control District might allow the sterile concrete channel that now bisected west Pasadena to be replaced by an underground conduit and the restoration of more traditional habitat where weeds now thrived.

Jencks read his resolution, which would prohibit activities that would destroy the natural beauty of the arroyo, but did not formally make a motion to allow his fellow directors the opportunity to consider the matter and what should be done.

One month later Jencks returned to the city board with a fleshed-out resolution in which the board “resolved that it shall be the policy of the city to preserve and maintain the Arroyo Seco area lands owned by it as a natural park,” although existing recreational facilities, such as the archery and fly casting areas, were allowed to continue. The resolution proclaimed that “the Arroyo Seco and its banks, between Oak Grove Park to the south city limits provide an expanse of open space unequaled within the city limits of any Southern California city.”

The resolution outlined a seven-point

program to protect and preserve the arroyo:

1. Permit no dumping or earth moving operation which disturbs the natural contours or natural vegetation of the arroyo banks.
2. Plant trees and shrubs wherever feasible with native plants and shrubs, and in particular, along the arroyo bottom plant sycamores, alders, laurels and cottonwoods.
3. Study ways of eliminating or modifying flood control channels after additional check dams in the upper arroyo have removed or reduced their necessity. In the meantime, planting will be started to reduce the “unsightliness” of the flood control facilities.
4. Encourage public use of the lower arroyo to increase user traffic and discourage criminal or delinquent activities, making it safe, particularly for children. Also, consider establishment of riding stables such as exist in Eaton Canyon and Oak Grove Park.

5. Seed an area of the lower arroyo with California wild flowers, particularly the California poppy, and establish an annual spring wild flower festival.
6. Encourage a program of gradual rebuilding of trails and walks leading into the lower arroyo, with nature study identification markers.
7. Reaffirm its support of a recreational lake area behind Devil’s Gate Dam.

Jenks again reminded the directors and the audience that protecting the arroyo was not new. He said early settlers had always intended that the area would be preserved as a natural park. Early photographs, he noted, show the arroyo bottom between the Colorado bridge and the south city limits as a “surpassingly beautiful wooded stream bed.” Jencks promised that there would be no immediate expense to the city except about \$100 to purchase and plant California poppy seeds.

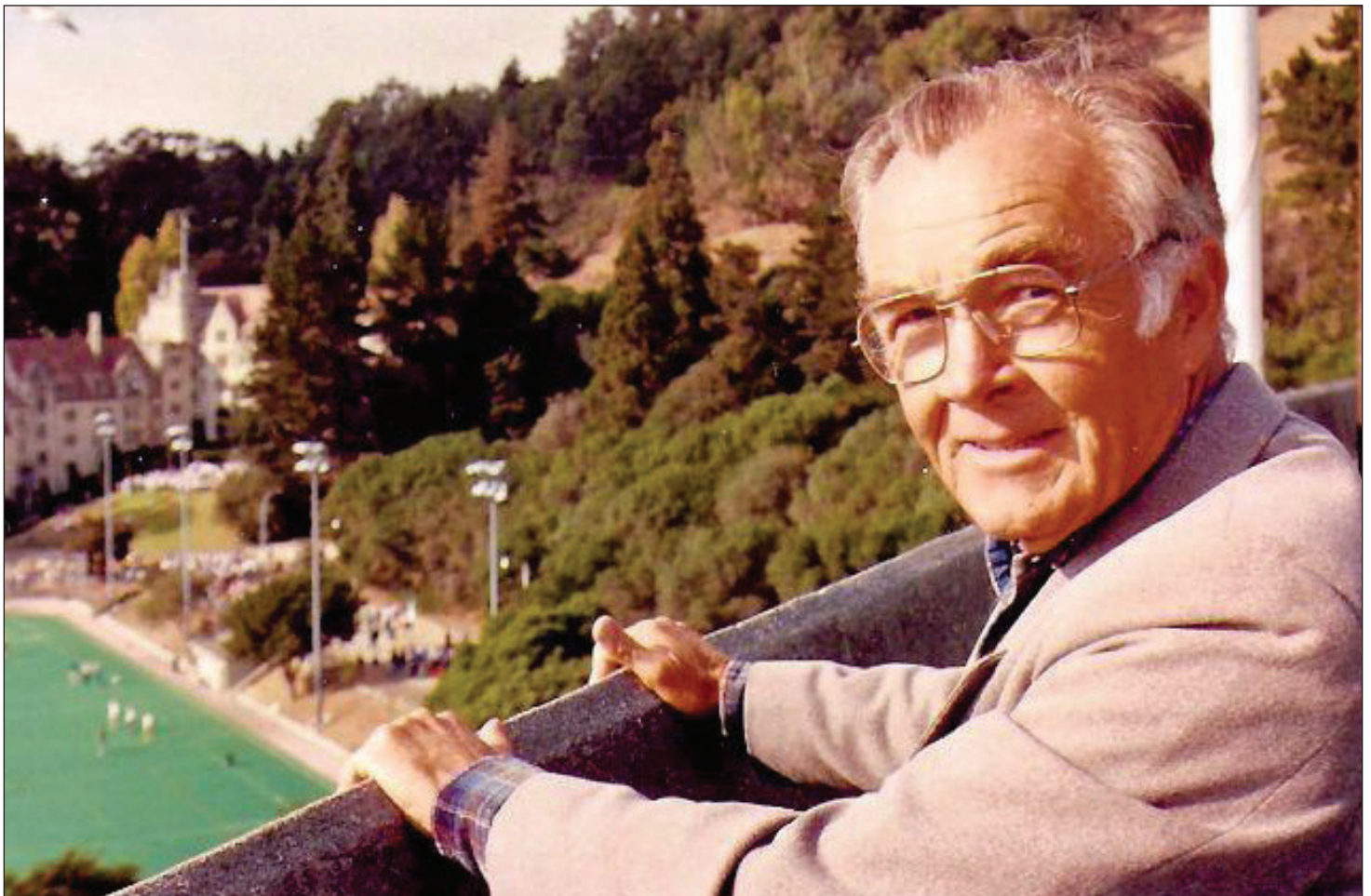
The motion passed unanimously, and several of the city directors urged that a similar

planning process should be established for Eaton Canyon on the east side of town.

Jencks didn’t stay on the Board of City Directors for long, moving back east in 1965 to become the president of the Alliance of Television and Film Producers, but he made a big impact in his short tenure.

The Jencks resolution was something of a wake-up call to Pasadena and to the broader arroyo community. It came after a period of neglect and provided clear policy guidance for the future. It responded directly to the construction of the flood control channel that had been built after WWII and demonstrated the deep, widespread concern about the destruction of the nature of the arroyo.

It also foreshadowed the development of the political clout of the WPRA and the historical preservation movement led by Pasadena Heritage. As a policy framework, its goals have shaped the discourse over the arroyo and particularly Pasadena’s lower arroyo over the past 50 years, although many elements remain unfilled to this day.



Richard Jenks enjoying sport from a bird’s-eye view in Berkeley