Detail: Future of Infrastructure podcast

Episode 13: Promoting Joy: The Role of Parks and Public Spaces in City Infrastructure

Host: Jeremy Goldberg

Guest: Phil Ginsburg (general manager of the San Francisco Recreation and Park Department)

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**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Welcome to the Future of Infrastructure. I’m Jeremy Goldberg, Worldwide Director of Critical Infrastructure at Microsoft. And I’m on a journey to learn more about how infrastructure is being built around the world, by talking with public servants, philanthropist, artists and place-makers who have spent their lives working in the public interest. This is a series to help us build things and plan for the future while putting people first.

So today, I’m thrilled to have Phil Ginsburg, the GM of San Francisco Rec and Park, a friend and city park innovator, join us on the future of infrastructure. Phil, so good to see you, and thank you for joining us.

**PHIL GINSBURG:** Jeremy, I’m so honored to – to be a guest on – on this podcast. Thanks for having me.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** So before we jump in, I know there are lots of different topics that you and I can, you know, discuss here today. Let’s start off with sharing a bit about yourself and who you are and the work that you do at San Francisco Rec and Park

**PHIL GINSBURG:** Well, I have been running the San Francisco park system for the last 13 years. And the fun fact there is it makes me the second longest serving parks director in San Francisco history, behind a guy by the name of John McLaren, who was one of the – who was basically the founding father of our park system.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** A long time ago, we sat down at McLaren Lodge, I believe, and had a meeting when I was a San Francisco resident. So you’re in good company.

**PHIL GINSBURG:** Indeed. So McLaren did it for 65 years. So I don’t think I’m going to catch him. But I have been doing it for a while. And before that, I had the pleasure of serving as then Mayor Gavin Newsom’s Chief of Staff. He’s now the governor of California. And I got to do some park stuff while I was working as his chief of staff.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** So here’s an easy one. What’s your favorite maybe lesser-known San Francisco Park?

**PHIL GINSBURG:** We have 225 parks in our system, and like you would never pick your favorite child, Jeremy, it’s very hard to get me to say my – what my favorite park is, although it’s probably Golden Gate Park.

But my favorite lesser-known park, oh, there some really, really, really wonderful ones. Well, let’s start with McLaren Park, which is actually the city’s second or third largest park, but it’s sort of the quiet cousin of Golden Gate Park, but it’s very spectacular in its own right.

I really love Palega in the Portola Bayview area. I love Mission Playground, this cute little pocket park off of Valencia, Boeddeker park in the Tenderloin. Ah, there’s too many good ones to get – to pin me down, Jeremy. Nice try.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** One of the things that we discussed before we started our topic and discussion today was around the importance of these investments that are being made in infrastructure, and San Francisco has made significant capital investment over many years under your leadership in the park infrastructure.

What I liked about something you shared with me before our discussion was about social infrastructure. So why don’t we start off with that?

**PHIL GINSBURG:** So our parks infrastructure, let’s just start there. And you know, when many people hear that I, you know, I work in parks, sometimes I’ll get, “Oh, that’s so sweet.” You know, parks are about jumpy houses, and birthday parties. And all of that is true, but parks are not just nice-to-haves in cities; parks are must-haves. Parks are not just amenities; they’re utilities. They’re truly infrastructure, and they’re both.

Well, let’s start with why parks are hard infrastructure, and they’re hard infrastructure because they absorb stormwater. They clean our air. They cool cities. So parks are truly hard infrastructure.

But parks are also social infrastructure, and that’s sort of an important concept. That is a place where people can come together and form community. I know that you’ve had people on to talk about placemaking. Placemaking is very important. Placemaking connects the past to the present and the present to the future.

I would say that parks are probably the most democratic institution we have left in America, maybe besides the concept of the public library, but parks are where we are all equal and equally welcome. They promote health. They promote public safety. They promote economic opportunity, environmental sustainability. But you know, parks are a serious business for cities, and a city that doesn’t have a good park system is not a healthy, thriving, equitable, livable city, that’s for sure.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** So you touched a bit on your previous work with mayor, then former Mayor Newsom, and the work that you’ve done in San Francisco. Was there a moment that you realized, you know, beyond like a general desire to really improve things, that parks and this work, especially around these shared experiences that you’re talking about, as you mentioned, and about people have, you know, ridden their bikes or taught their kids how to ride their bike in Golden Gate Park. I have an experience, too, that I recall from running in Golden Gate Park. Was there something for you that was a draw, that this felt like a calling for you – was there a moment?

**PHIL GINSBURG:** So when I was in Mayor Newsom’s office, I was involved in a negotiation and compromise over whether cars would be allowed on JFK Drive, and that was back in 2007. And that compromise took for up until the pandemic.

And during the pandemic, we basically gave people more room. and we closed the park – this main road in the park to cars, and people loved it. We saw a tremendous increase in usage.

And so, we have worked over the past couple of years with just about everyone who has an opinion on this to shape and craft legislation, with a bunch of adaptations, to ensure that, you know, those who need accessible features in the park could have them.

But JK is now closed to cars. And of course, those who are upset about it have put it on the ballot. So we’ll find out whether it sticks in November. But that was a big moment for me in the park world.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Pulling back the curtain on how you get through those battles. You’ve been through so many. And that one that you mentioned around, you know, closure, you know, closing the park to vehicles, what does that negotiation look like, right? For our audience, maybe you can provide a sort of a peek under the hood, if you will.

**PHIL GINSBURG:** So the way I would describe my job is it’s exactly like the sitcom *Parks and Recreation*, and I am the – I guess the Amy Poehler character. She had a line once and she said, “I never hear people yelling at me; they’re just loving their parks loudly.”

So there are a whole lot of San Franciscans that love their parks very loudly. And again, it speaks to why parks should rightly be considered as critical infrastructure in cities, right?

Parks are so deeply important to people who live in cities, that everyone has a strong opinion about them, and everyone brings their own lens and their own set of values to how parks should look and feel and how they should be used.

So if you start there, it makes it a little easier when people call you all kinds of names. But then you try to, you know, stay the course and you try to listen, but you also try to do what you think is right for our park system.

And that’s a balance of values in and of itself, ranging from promoting equity to promoting environmental sustainability, to promoting economic development, to promoting joy, right? All of those things are very relevant in making a policy decision about parks.

Partnerships are really important, right, in cities, generally. And so, we’ve had a partnership with Another Planet entertainment for many years, going back to when I was working for Mayor Newsom. And it’s a really important one, because it is such an iconic thing, right?

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** To pull off an event of that size, and to build something like that, that people will look to, look forward to every year, you know, what does it take? What does it look like? And what are some of the variables that you and your team are thinking about as you land and host that event annually?

**PHIL GINSBURG:** You want to bring some fun and some joy. Our mayor, London Breed was out for a couple of days. And you know, she’s been San Francisco’s biggest cheerleader in the post-pandemic recovery saying, hey, San Francisco is back, you know, and let’s have some fun and come visit us, come see us.

And you know, San Francisco has also taken its share of hits over the last couple of years on very difficult topics that affect all cities, such as, you know, homelessness, and car break-ins and things like that. But there’s so much that’s right about our city and so much that’s amazing and exuberant about our city, and it’s nice to be able to focus on that a little bit.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** So there are a couple of big projects that you have going on. The one that may be the most important thing that you’re working on right now is the India Basin. So if you could give us a short overview of the project and why it’s so important to the city and the region, I know this is an area that our audience would really love to hear more about.

**PHIL GINSBURG:** So just a little bit of context setting about our park system in San Francisco. We have about 230 Parks, about 4,000 acres of open space, and very proudly, San Francisco was the first city in the country where 100% of us live within a 10-minute walk of a park.

But all parks aren’t created equal and San Francisco, like all cities, has suffered from systemic racism and inequities where, you know, neighborhoods are frankly – have received different levels of investment over generations.

And the India Basin Project is in the city’s Bayview, which is a historically black community and a working-class community, a poor community, many inequities, big gaps in social determinants of health in the Bayview from other neighborhoods in San Francisco.

And so, this project is really unlike anything we’ve done before. It’s a really a once in a generation opportunity involving 1.7 miles of dilapidated waterfront open space. It involves a major renovation of the shoreline, again, in a really often forgotten community that has faced, you know, decades and decades and decades of racism and pollution.

When it’s completed, and it’s about a $200 million effort, the park is going to deliver waterfront views, shore access, play areas for kids and community spaces. And what makes this significant is the park is within one mile of over 2,500 units of existing or planned public and affordable housing.

And when you make that level of investment in a community that has historically been marginalized, communities are not often crazy about it, because, you know, particularly after generations of, frankly, a lack of trust and broken promises by government, you know, in the community, their first response is often, you know, “Not interested, you’re not really building this for us, you’re going to chase us out, you’re building this for who’s going to come next.”

So we have heard that and looked at, you know, sort of both best practices around the country and also looked at where big in – park infrastructure projects have triggered displacement, and we are doing things a little differently.

So this project is guided by something called an Equitable Development Plan, which is a first for our city and one of very few efforts around the country. It’s an emerging best practice, and it ensures that the park is designed and shaped by community at every stage, and that every dollar of investment in the project is leveraged for the existing community.

You know, there’s maybe a hundred different initiatives that are all designed to strengthen the resiliency and stability of the existing community as we build this park. So it’s the most ambitious project I’ve certainly ever been involved in. I think it’s probably the most important park project in San Francisco’s history. And it is an emerging best practice for how cities make major infrastructure investment in historically disenfranchised neighborhoods.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** And it touches on some of the things you mentioned earlier around parks as a place or space for connecting the past to the present, and the present to the future. In the present moment where you are evaluating success, equitable development planning is really important and great to learn more about. What are some of those, you know, current success kind of metrics that you’re looking at? I heard you mentioned trust building obviously in there. What are some of the things you’re tracking right now?

**PHIL GINSBURG:** Well, we are very carefully tracking our investment and making sure that the money we raise and that the money, both public and private funding is going to support the community.

So I mentioned our learn to swim effort. I mentioned some of the workforce training initiatives. Ultimately, we will be successful if – if we do not see 10 years from now significant displacement and if we see a narrowing of the gap of some of the historic social determinants of health, right? We want our kids to be healthy. We want people to be employed. We want the land and water in this neighborhood to be clean. We want this park used by this community and not by, you know, necessarily just by tourists. I want everybody to feel welcome in this space, but we are building this space for the Bayview.

And, it’s a little bit of an experiment, and it’s one of the reasons I like local government, because it’s a big laboratory and you try things and sometimes things work, and sometimes they don’t. But we are being very thoughtful and very deliberate about our approach to this park. And again, I would call it arguably the most important park project in modern San Francisco history.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** What are some of the operational challenges to implementation? You’ve mentioned some already, but what are some of those that you anticipate you might face and how you overcome them. As people look to San Francisco for many things around the globe, for leadership, of course, what are some of the things that you would advise or you would suggest that others pursuing something similar, should do to try to overcome them?

**PHIL GINSBURG:** In a project like this, I mean, like, you know, you really have to go deep. And this is a project where actually sort of government has to be okay with letting go of some of the power and some of the control of the project, and really sort of empowering and investing n the community to really develop the project.

A component of this project that I didn’t mention earlier is that, you know, normally government comes in and invites people to show up at a community meeting and share their opinions. And, you know, then they go away, and government does what it wants to do.

We actually have our paying community residents to be part of the planning and governance team of the project. We are recognizing that their expertise is as important as mine, or as any project manager I have working on the project. And so, that’s kind of an interesting element.

I think on a project like this, if you really want to build trust and do it the right way, you just have to be okay with sort of letting go of some of the sort of traditional power that government has. And it means the project goes a little slower, it means it’s a little messier, but, you know, we think the adage is, what is it, if you want to go fast, go alone, and if you want to go far, you go together, right? So a little trite, but I mean, I think that that adage is really important.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** One of the things I’d like to hear from you on in terms of, you know, indicators, or kind of experience that you would be willing to share as far as like the importance of parks in terms of the wellness benefits and health benefits. So if there’s some things that you could reference or point to around improvements around quality of life and health for San Franciscans, that would be great.

**PHIL GINSBURG:** The benefits of being in parks are numerous. And they were really emphasized, and people began to really understand them during COVID.

But let’s start with both the physical and mental health benefits of being outside. And with all due respect to Microsoft and technology, which serves a very important role in society, you know, the sad fact is, is that our children are spending much more time these days behind the screen than they are outside. So giving kids a reason to be outside, to experience nature is more important than ever.

You know, physical activity is certainly important, but the mental health benefits of not being in front of a screen and being connected to nature are well documented and tons of data about the more time you spend outside, the better society’s mental health outcomes are.

You know, during COVID it was a really remarkable time for parks all around the country, and particularly in San Francisco, right? San Francisco was basically shut down. We were parked, but our park system was open. And, you know, in a sense, we were the only game in town. You know, Golden Gate Park became the new downtown in San Francisco. The Financial District was – was a ghost town, but everybody was in Golden Gate Park or McLaren park or one of their neighborhood parks.

And parks really had a moment and I think it has helped our society understand that parks are truly essential. And again, getting back to what we talked about at the beginning. Jeremy, parks are not just nice-to-haves; they’re totally critical to our physical and mental health and our wellbeing. And particularly those of us who are living in dense cities, they’re just absolutely critical. And, you know, and they certainly were during COVID,

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** And in many ways, the frontline workers, the health workers and social services and others that obviously have done incredible work throughout the pandemic, the Parks Department, the people that you work with, the custodial staffs and maintenance and others, those are frontline health workers, too. Kudos to you and to your teams for everything that you’ve done there and really being an exemplar for the work and the importance of parks. They’re not nice-to-haves, you’re right. They’re necessities for all of us.

**PHIL GINSBURG:** Thank you. COVID is not quite in the rearview mirror, but like sort of the emotional poignancy of the crisis we were in has started to dissipate a little bit, but like, I will often get, you know, like, I’ll get choked up when I think about – my staff, they were heroes. I mean, nothing short of heroes. I mean, our school district shut down and my rec staff and my lifeguards and my electricians and my plumbers, I mean, they took care of kids who had no place else to go.

They will always have my gratitude because, you know, one of the interesting emerging things that’s come out of COVID, we talk a lot about privilege that certain segments of our society enjoys/

What’s come out of COVID is a concept that I would refer to as white collar privilege, meaning if you’re an administrative worker, or you’re in tech, you know, the debate now about getting people back to their offices, right, it’s like, certain people can work remotely and can work from home and certain people can’t. And that is an increasing challenge, I think, in our society. And I could work from home, and frankly, I’m doing this podcast from home right now, right? But if you’re a park ranger, or you’re a custodian, the only way that bathroom in that park is going to be open is if a custodian is actually there, to clean it, and to open it and to close it at night, they’re heroes.

I mean, they, you know, my staff had the same angst about COVID and had the same responsibilities to their family that everybody else had, but they didn’t have the opportunity to work from home.

And for that, they will always have my gratitude and they should have those frontline workers should have all of our gratitude for a long time.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** What is one thing you’ve read, you’ve watched or listened to lately that had an impact on how you think about this moment in infrastructure and this moment in cities in parks?

**PHIL GINSBURG:** I’m going to give you two. One is something I’ve watched that really impacted me, and it was an incredible movie, small release, but very highly regarded called *The Last Black Man in San Francisco*. And part of it was filmed actually at India Basin. Jimmy Fails wrote this movie, and it was really powerful, and it really struck me and made me think about the importance of equity, and the importance of preserving and celebrating black culture in San Francisco, and the importance of making sure that cities really work for everyone.

And then since this is an infrastructure podcast, and yesterday, we learned about the passing of David McCullough, the author, he wrote the most amazing book about the creation of the Panama Canal. It was like one of those like, 750-page nonfiction books that nobody ever really finishes, and it was such a page-turner.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** I haven’t read it, but *The Path Between the Seas* I think is the title. I have so many takeaways from this discussion with you today, Phil, and, you know, most of all, just an appreciation for the leadership that you and your team and the partners that you work with, to help, you know, advance equitable and accessible parks and cities for people and continuing to walk the walk, or to take that great hike. And so, we look forward to staying in touch and seeing you the next time around in San Francisco.

**PHIL GINSBURG:** Thank you, Jeremy. I really appreciate it. This was fun. And congratulations on the podcast. Invite me back on. We’ll talk more.

**JEREMY GOLDBERG:** Thanks for listening to this episode and being a part of the *Future of Infrastructure*, and for joining me on this journey to meet and learn from the people improving life in their communities.

If you liked today’s episode and want to help other people find it, please take a moment to share, rate, and review the show.

To learn more, visit us at wwps.microsoft.com or find me on LinkedIn and Twitter at Jeremy M. Goldberg.

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