

“The Saga of the Kallman Family Overlook” Dennis Thompson

Soon after The Mesa Architects began our volunteer work in the community in 2008, we identified a seemingly ideal project: to make a small unused part of the Coast Guard property on Meigs Road, below Washington School, available to the public as an ocean-overlook park. The city of Santa Barbara's coastal plan had designated it as a potential public overlook site. Local Coast Guard officials told us that it was a maintenance nuisance for them, and they referred us to the Coast Guard's real property division in Oakland.

A Coast Guard official in Oakland wrote us a lengthy email about how common it is for local groups to request public access to Coast Guard land and told us that a government entity must be the “licensee”. He also said they would need to review a complete proposal before approving the use.

This gave us the green light to prepare a site plan and cost estimate for a low-impact development and to approach the City about the project. We were told in no uncertain terms by City officials that they did not have the desire or budget to create and maintain such a park.

That led us into researching the possibility of obtaining grants and private donations to fund the park. We talked to various groups, including Santa Barbara County, the Santa Barbara Trust for Public Land, Santa Barbara Beautiful, the Santa Barbara Foundation, the Fund for Santa Barbara, the Elings Park Foundation, the Maritime Museum, the Mesa Business Association, Santa Barbara Bank & Trust, and the Coastal Conservancy. Our conclusion was that money could likely be raised to fund the modest construction cost, but not to create an endowment for permanent maintenance.

In 2015, after his first “district election”, Council member Randy Rowse offered to help move the project forward. He connected us to Carol Kallman, who offered to help with the fund-raising, and we found that the Elings Park Foundation would “consider” being the non-profit to contract with the City for fiscal and administrative responsibility, while the Mesa Architects would be responsible for design, permitting, and maintenance.

With this arrangement and team in place, we asked the City Council in 2017 to contract with the Coast Guard and the Elings Park Foundation. They unanimously agreed, and authorized the City Attorney and Parks Department to move the project forward. The City Attorney obtained the form of agreement for a 20-year license from the Coast Guard, and Elings Park obtained quotes for liability insurance for the property, so that neither the Coast Guard nor the City would be financially responsible for accidents or lawsuits. We identified the SBCC Horticulture Department as the likely on-site maintainers of the project, and we found surveyors and geologists willing to do the necessary site studies.

Soon after the Parks Department sent our full proposal to the Coast Guard, a different Coast Guard official sent a letter denying “any construction to allow public access.” In a subsequent conversation with yet another Coast Guard official, we were told that we should never have interpreted the previous communications as approval and that the Coast Guard was reserving the property for “future uses.” When we appealed to our Congressman's office, a Coast Guard public information officer told them the same thing.

We are professionals used to dealing with bureaucracies, but this was a total shock to us. We wonder why the Coast Guard invited our application originally and again last year! We are extremely disappointed because of all the energy and good will put into this effort, and because we know it would be a lovely gathering place for the community. We are sorry to have raised the hopes of our neighbors.

If you have any comments about this or other potential projects to improve “community, self-sufficiency, and sustainability” on the Mesa, please visit our website at www.mesavillage.org, and leave us a note there.