

Coalition of Advocates for Lake Merritt (CALM) and the History of Measure DD: The Creation of Lake Merritt Boulevard

by James E. Vann, Architect and Co-founder of CALM

[Adapted from a foreword to Erik Niemann's photographic documentation of the construction of Lake Merritt Boulevard.]

The present expansive, impressive, invigorating south environs of the Lake Merritt area are achievements that were never meant to happen.

In early 2013, the sparkling new, six-lane, tree-lined Lake Merritt Boulevard – complete with new vehicular bridge, new multi-use pedestrian bridge, broad sidewalks and jogging paths, pedestrian-activated signal crossings, day-lighted estuary flow, newly created 4-acre park, lush landscaping, amphitheater, and lake overlook -- opened to auto, pedestrian, and bicycle traffic, and were formally presented to the city in a colorful and exciting celebration 9 June 2013. Excepting its newness, onlookers could easily presume the smooth-flowing roadway, pedestrian crossings, and ample landscaping were always this way. Nothing could be farther from actuality.

Just two years earlier, at the site of the new Boulevard, stood an impenetrable ¼ mile, 12-lane freeway, with over and under ramps, long-closed dark and scary pedestrian tunnels beneath, narrow sidewalks hugging the roadway, a dreary 10 feet high seawall with no shoreline access, no lanes for bikes, and pedestrians who dared cross to the other side of the freeway literally put their lives at risk.

The intended construction for the Lake Merritt Boulevard site was a 160-foot high Calatrava-designed cathedral perched on a huge concrete parking podium spanning the former 12-lane mini-freeway. The intended cathedral, just 10-feet from the landmark Oakland Civic Auditorium (renamed HJ Kaiser Convention Center, now vacant) and its seven exquisitely sculpted two-story high niches facing the lake -- work of famed sculptor, Sterling Calder (father of celebrated current mobile sculpter Alexander Calder) - - would all but obliterate the beloved 1915 Beaux Arts building.

The ill-begotten City Hall scheme, uncovered by a future CALM member, sparked strong reactions from design and preservation activists, who came together out of outrage to challenge the all-but-finalized ‘giveaway’ of public assets. Adopting the name, “CALM” (Coalition of Advocates for Lake Merritt), the group swiftly framed arguments against the proposed sale of Peralta Park, dedicated public land that housed the Auditorium, a childrens’ play area, and public parking. Armed with strong arguments and an alternative sketch for the area, the activists initiated conversations with city staffers and councilmembers. That the proposed ‘sole source’ sale of restrictively-deeded parkland violated several provisions of the city charter made no difference to policymakers; who chose not to oppose then Mayor Jerry Brown, principal advocate for the cathedral.

CALM then challenged the 'sole-source' negotiations as a violation of the City Charter, and demanded an open bidding process. The Council yielded, and on 9 July 2001, a Request for Proposals (RFP) was issued.

Hesitant that the RFP was predetermined, CALM initiated a mass organizing campaign to enlist the Oakland community in defeating the warped process directed toward the certain-to-be-selected Cathedral project. As result of leafleting and word of mouth, over 300 people signed petitions and attended two open meetings in August and early September in opposition to the barely announced project. On hearing various suggestions from individuals and other groups, CALM presented sketches of an alternative to transform the south Lake-12th St area, which were enthusiastically received by attendees. Recommendations were offered, and a second meeting was scheduled. At this time, CALM's focused objective was defeat or withdrawal of the City's proposed sell-off of deeded public land. At the second meeting, Councilmember Nancy Nadel urged CALM to participate in the RFP process as "the only way to have the proposal taken seriously and to get the community's opposition publically heard." Following additional refinements and recommendations, the meeting concluded with the community's unanimous endorsement that "the revised 'Lake Merritt Boulevard Plan' be submitted as the community's alternative to a high-rise development as outlined in the City's RFP."

Prior to the second community meeting, CALM professionals undertook a detailed analysis of the cathedral's proforma, and found that the construction estimate for the Calatrava design exceeded the budget established by the Regional Diocese. In addition, CALM discovered a major and costly omission. Spanish Architect Calatrava's team assumed a typical reinforced concrete foundation for the cathedral and podium platform, overlooking the foundation system of the adjacent auditorium. Because the entire area is marshland, to remain stable the auditorium is supported on wood pilings spaced 4 to 5 feet apart and driven 60 to 80 feet into the mud. At various group meetings where representatives of the Diocese presented the proposed cathedral, CALM also attended. And during discussion, CALM exposed the foundation error which was projected to drive actual costs 3 to 4 times above initial estimates, vastly exceeding the established budget for the project.

Following the second community assembly, CALM, in a hurriedly-called meeting, consented to take up the community's request; mobilized its resources; drew up a series of site plans and rendered perspectives of the Boulevard Plan; developed a colorful slide presentation; prepared a proposal response booklet -- complete with site, demolition, and phasing plans, cost estimates and schedules, financing schemes, and letters of endorsement from a broad array of community organizations. CALM's community-based response was submitted 7 September 2001, the RFP deadline.

Three responses were submitted to the RFP, and were presented in a public hearing 12 September 2001: (1) By a developer, essentially to purchase the land; (2) the Cathedral as proposed by the Diocese, although anticipating little opposition, submitted only a narrative statement; and (3) CALM's community-based proposal, complete with a dazzling visual presentation.

CALM is unaware of what may have happened next, but, as information of the foundation oversight became known, the Diocese began to speak less openly about the proposed cathedral. The Mayor grew less assertive, and actually held two interactive meetings with CALM representatives. Staffs' recommendation on the RFP responses was overshadowed by City Council members. The Council unashamedly voiced enthusiasm for CALM's presentation as a creative and desirable vision for the City, and one that effectively solved many long-standing problems of the south Lake area and its non-connections north and south of the 12th St mini-freeway. The City Council endorsed the concepts of CALM's Community-Based Plan for Lake Merritt Boulevard, and directed that the boundaries of the 'in-process' Lake Merritt Master Plan be expanded to include the south Lake environs and to incorporate the concepts of the CALM Community Plan into its proposals.

Building on the Council's enthusiasm, Danny Wan, a practical councilmember and former bond attorney, proclaimed that the "Lake Merritt Master Plan" and "Lake Merritt Boulevard Plan" would not be "put on the shelf to be forgotten." Soon after, Councilmember Wan formed an Implementation Committee, with CALM an invited member. In July 2002, following limited gauging of voter sentiment, a \$198 million bond measure (appx \$45 million to LMB-related improvements) – "The Oakland Trust for Clean Water & Safe Parks" -- was put to voters. The measure received resounding over 80% approval.

In 2002, CALM, together with other organizations achieved the City Council's "sanction" for an unaffiliated grouping of interested community members, forever open to visitors and new members, to perform the official oversight role for Measure DD projects. Organized as "The Measure DD Community Coalition," the Coalition meets monthly (or bi-monthly according to need) to review the progress of some 56 individual Measure DD projects; oversee authorized expenditures, review and comment on proposed changes; assist in endorsing and buttressing applications for supplemental funding grants; and to serve as the 'community sounding board' for staff and program consultants. Practically all Measure DD contracts have proceeded according to plan – "on time and on budget."

The magnificent physical, traffic, and landscape improvements that define Lake Merritt Park and Lake Merritt Boulevard (completed June 2013), put new shine on the "Jewel of Oakland," and establish the south Lake area as a popular attraction for relaxation and contemplation, a new amphitheater venue for civic and informal events, and a hugely welcoming and attractive new regional recreation destination for the entire East Bay.

Lake Merritt Boulevard and its associated accomplishments is basically the story of an exemplary process of community organizing, advocacy, and stick-to-it determination in fighting to protect and preserve the community's legacy over the vagaries of City Hall and the quixotic attraction of short term economic injection.

In May and June 2013, CALM's civic contributions were publicly feted in recognition ceremonies by Oakland Heritage Alliance, Lake Merritt Breakfast Club, Alameda County Board of Supervisors, and the City of Oakland.