

Speedee would be proud

Grant from late McDonald's heiress is welcome in L.B.

Long Beach Press Telegram

We all talk about how Central Long Beach needs more recreational opportunities. Then we talk and talk and talk some more. Maybe soon we can relax our larynx.

The City Council did right Tuesday by agreeing to enter a partnership with the Salvation Army that that could turn the Hamilton Bowl area used for flood control and soccer games into a field of dreams for inner-city youth and adults starving for amenities.

The council entered into a memorandum of understanding with the Salvation Army to bring swimming, recreational facilities, child care, a library (no property tax, mind you) and a computer learning lab to 19 acres next to Long Beach City College's Pacific Coast Campus.

Everyone in Long Beach would benefit because this project would replace negative temptations afforded to idle youth with positive opportunities to build minds and muscles. Nothing will solve all of the area's problems, but letting the Salvation Army give kids swimming lessons is better than some gangster teaching them how to use a spray paint can.

Big dreams need big money, and this time it's not coming from City Hall. The Salvation Army is a finalist for a \$50 million Kroc Center grant and has the opportunity to use Big Mac money for something big. The funding would come from the \$1.5 billion endowment left by Joan Kroc, whose husband, Ray Kroc, went from selling milkshake makers to the McDonald's brothers in San Bernardino to franchising their hamburger restaurants worldwide. Maybe a little fast food's not so bad after all.

There are plenty of questions about the flood control area's suitability, and there is no guarantee the money will come here as seven other cities have bids in too. But the council was proactive in sending a message to the foundation that Long Beach wants and needs this project and that those issues can be resolved in the planning stages. Translation: Get the \$50 million now, ask questions later.

The city is in the process of acquiring the land from the county and would enter into a lease agreement that lets the Salvation Army use it. The city would help with maintenance and other costs, but the taxpayer burden would be miniscule.

Councilwoman Bonnie Lowenthal has expressed reservations about the city entering into an agreement with a religious organization like the Salvation Army. Lowenthal was right to inquire. No one wants a short-sighted ACLU action like the one that led to the historic cross symbolizing California missions being ripped from the Los Angeles County seal.

This is unlikely to happen. The city attorney's office said Wednesday that partnerships between public and religious organizations are legal when they provide primarily secular services and do not discriminate based on religious affiliation. The existing Kroc Center in San Diego proves that is not a concern. The partnership in Long Beach should not only meet any church-state test, it will likely demonstrate how well public and faith-based organizations can work together to meet some of the bottomless needs of the disadvantaged.