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Santa Ana, Parkland Play a Mean Game of Hide-and-Seek

The city is far below nation's 50 largest in parkland acres per person. One small plot near downtown is being considered.

By Jennifer Delson, Times Staff Writer

Irma Rivera is a mother who wants her children to play. But from her home in Santa Ana, it can take an hour to get to the closest city park by bus.

Too often, her 7-year-old and 12-year-old are watching television after school.

"There is nowhere for them to go, and we really don't have the time to take them but on Saturday and Sunday afternoons," said Rivera, 35, who lives near downtown. "Mostly every kid in this neighborhood is in the same boat. And the managers of the apartment complexes don't want them playing in common areas."

It's a complaint that might be likely in the dense cities of the Northeast. But in Santa Ana?

Orange County's largest and most densely populated city — with 339 acres of public parkland in 41 parks — ranks far below the nation's 50 largest cities in terms of acres of parkland per person, according to a survey by the Trust for Public Land, a nonprofit land conservancy headquartered in San Francisco.

"The reality is that we have a very densely populated central Orange County," said county Supervisor Lou Correa, who has proposed a 26-mile linear park along the Santa Ana River. "We did not plan adequately for the population growth. This is an issue of equity and quality of life. We need open space for our children in central Orange County."

Orange County has set aside 32,000 acres for parkland and open space, including regional and wilderness parks, nature preserves, recreational trails, historic sites and beaches.

None is in Santa Ana, the county seat, except the site of the Old Orange County Courthouse, designated as a historical site.

New York and Chicago each has four times the amount of park acreage per person as Santa Ana; Miami has about three times the amount. Oakland, Los Angeles, Long Beach, Sacramento, San Jose and Fresno have between three and 10 times as much. Anaheim has nearly double the parkland, with 1.9 acres for every 1,000 people.

Santa Ana officials say they do not have resources to create another park. Even if they did, the \$12-million budget for the city's Parks, Recreation and Community Services Agency would leave no means to maintain it, said Ron Ono, Santa Ana parks administrative services manager.

So severe is the problem that nonprofit groups and citizens are stepping in to help.

Their \$500,000 plan calls for a small park to open next summer in one of Orange County's poorest neighborhoods, near downtown Santa Ana. It would occupy a large fenced-in empty lot owned by the city near 3rd and Lacy streets. Plans call for a jogging trail, a small community center and exercise stations. The city planning commission is expected to consider the park in the coming weeks.

"The area where this space will be available is an area where there is nothing right now," Ono said. "We do not have the money to expand. We are just trying to get to deferred maintenance on the parks we have. That's why this is an important project."

With limited public grants, Santa Ana has struggled to maintain its parks, among them 87-acre Centennial Regional Park, which includes playground equipment, bike paths and fishing, and Prentice Park, home to the popular 20-acre, city-owned Santa Ana Zoo.

The call for more parkland comes as more and more attention is being paid to childhood physical fitness in Santa Ana because of increasingly high rates of obesity and childhood diabetes.

A study by the California Center for Public Health Advocacy showed that among the 10 largest cities in California, Santa Ana has the highest percentage of obese children: 34.8%.

Others in Santa Ana also recognize the need to provide solutions to the open space problem. The Santa Ana Unified School District opens fields that close after school by request for sporting events.

At Willard Intermediate School, parents are trying to raise money to build a fitness center.

Even so, said America Bracho, executive director of Latino Health Access, more

opportunities for play and recreation are needed.

"The place where you live defines your opportunity for health and success. What chance do you have if you live in a neighborhood where there is no place to play or gather?" Bracho asked.

No one in Santa Ana is more aware of the increasing health problems than this group, which trains residents to teach their mostly Spanish-speaking neighbors about health problems.

The trained residents, referred to by the Spanish word *promotoras*, are dispatched to apartment complexes to inform neighbors how to prevent rampant diabetes and other health problems.

In these apartment complexes, it is common to see signs that read, "No skateboarding. No rollerblading, bicycles, loud music, soccer or ball playing." After dark, the neighborhoods near the planned park are unsafe, said Bracho, in part because of bars that dot the streets.

Latino Health Access last year obtained from the city the right to develop the park. Now the group is talking to the city about transferring the property to the nonprofit, possibly through a 100-year-lease on three of four parcels. The fourth parcel would be donated by Northgate Market, a regional supermarket chain.

The arrangement is unusual, said Peter Harnik, director of the Center for City Park Excellence at the Trust for Public Land, a park advocacy group in Washington, D.C. Harnik said he was unfamiliar with arrangement in Santa Ana but hoped it would provide more open space.

"Ninety-nine percent of all city parks in the United States are run by cities," Harnik said. "Running a park is not that easy. Very few nonprofits are up to the task. It's much harder than people think."

Park improvements, which will cost about \$500,000, will be donated by community members, among them Jim Bostic, assistant vice president of construction for the St. Joseph Health System in Orange, which has donated engineering and architectural services elsewhere. Donations and money that Latino Health Access hopes to get from grants will pay for park maintenance.

Carmen Luevano, a 33-year-old mother of three, lives in an apartment near the proposed park and eagerly awaits its opening.

"What we need here is a place for children to play safely," Luevano said, "something that will allow them to play like they did in the old days, before life was so complicated and children faced adult problems like obesity so early on."