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Paradise parks district celebrates big anniversary in 'oasis' of greenery

Bille Park has provided a sanctuary before and since Camp Fire

By **ED BOOTH** | ebooth@chicoer.com |

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PARADISE — A westbound drive on Bille Road, west of the Skyway, shows an area still largely devoid of trees, even almost five years following the Camp Fire.

Likewise, few of the older homes in that area exist anymore. While new homes have replaced some of them, Paradise's legendary sky-high and thick conifers are no longer around to provide welcome shade and fragrant air.

However, Bille Park — near the far western end of the road — is an oasis of tall trees and cool recreation opportunities. It was a fitting location for Saturday's 75th anniversary celebration for the Paradise Recreation and Park District because it typified Paradise as many of its citizens probably remember it from before the 2018 conflagration.





Dave Azevedo, owner of Oroville-based Dave's Dam Dogs, grills hot dogs and hamburgers attendees could enjoy at no charge during the Paradise Recreation and Park District's 75th anniversary celebration in Bille Park, in Paradise, California, Saturday, Aug. 12, 2023. (Ed Booth/Enterprise-Record)

"It was actually one of the places that was a source of refuge," Dan Efseaff, PRPD's district manager, said during Saturday's festivities. "We have a high concentration of trees here that survived really well" despite what he called "a lot of mortality" for the trees.

Efseaff said the park, whose property the district acquired in 1961 and expanded in 2005, remains a significant source of pride for the community. That was apparent Saturday as people of all ages came to the facility for free hot dogs and hamburgers, live music, face painting and a bounce house for children, and several booths representing local organizations.

"It's a great location. It has served the community before, during and after the fire," Efseaff said. "Folks are seeing a green oasis here."

Dan Azevedo, owner of Dan's Dam Dogs of Oroville, and his assistants "Animal" Patten and Slade Thornton, were busy distributing freshly grilled hot dogs and hamburgers to attendees. Many people eagerly lined up for the inviting food, including Erin Smith of Chico.

Smith, who grew up in Paradise and attended local schools, said she was pleased

Nearby, 4-year-old Hailey Killip of Paradise was enjoying a snuggle with Wildfire Ready Raccoon, the mascot of the Butte County Fire Safe Council. Hailey got a couple of stickers with pictures of the raccoon.

“Stickers are nice,” Hailey explained.

Natalie Smiley, a Fire Safe Council representative accompanying the raccoon, said hers is a “grassroots, nonprofit organization providing education and outreach” to the region’s residents, particularly those in areas vulnerable to fire. The group also sponsors fuel-reduction efforts.

“We want people to be aware of what to do so they can be good stewards” of the land and forests, Smiley said.

Smiley cited several projects the Fire Safe Council has overseen. The group has just completed planting 16,000 trees in the Brush Creek area of eastern Butte County, which suffered considerable damage from the 2020 North Complex Fire. The council is also sponsoring 300 acres of fuel reduction, in progress near Lake Madrone.

“Workers are currently masticating a lot of the fuels in that area,” Smiley said. There will be a similar project near Clipper Mills, beginning in October, to reduce fuels on 800 acres of land.

Finally, Smiley said, a Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) grant will help fund cleanup of lingering effects from the North Complex Fire.

Efseaff said there are some exciting improvements coming to Bille Park, with construction likely getting underway in late 2024.

One new amenity will be a “bike skills” course, thanks to what he described as having “a considerable slope to it.” It will be best-suited for mountain bikes, and similar to a ski slope – with trails that are easy, moderate and difficult. Also for bicycles – in this case, BMX-style bikes – will be a “pump course,” allowing users to pedal hard and then jump their bikes on a specially designed course.

Finally, some “adventure features” – including a rope course, and rocks and obstacles suitable for climbing by children and young adults – are part of the district’s plans.

“There will be some ‘team-building’ activities here.” Efseaff said, referring to

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