

Park brings new life to two neighborhoods

By [Pilar Ulibarri de Rivera](#), Neighborhood Post Staff Writer

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La Hacienda Gardens is a new, quiet little park tucked away into a corner of a neighborhood in the northeast section of the city, just east of Federal Highway.

Prisca Augustyn, a La Hacienda neighborhood resident since 2001, sits on a shaded bench and chats with her neighbors. She keeps an eye on her two children, hanging and sliding from the playground equipment in the neighborhood park, created as part of the city's Downtown Master Plan.

"Although pocket parks like this are small, they have the potential to greatly impact a neighborhood," said Howard Lewis, Community Redevelopment Agency vice chair, to a group of people gathered for the La Hacienda Garden's ribbon-cutting ceremony on Feb. 3. Among the group were residents, the mayor, vice mayor, other CRA members and city employees.

Parks such as this one also are in the works in several southwest neighborhoods and will be springing up throughout various residential parts of the city.

"It's nice because we can walk here," said Augustyn, who lives down the street.

Before the park was built she mostly traveled with Fredric, 3, and Helen, 16 months, to Veterans Park or to the beach.

According to the master plan, which was adopted in 2002, the city is increasingly attracting families with children, and there are no small neighborhood parks where they can walk to play or where their parents will let them go on their own.

The parks, which can be playgrounds, picnic areas or open green spaces, are meant to be used by people who live nearby. The idea is to give residents a sense of ownership and civic pride and to become a point of orientation.

At La Hacienda - which has about 50 homes - the pride of the neighbors who attended the ribbon cutting was apparent. Plans for the park started about three years ago. The land was donated by New Urban Communities, which built the Old Palm Grove development directly north of La Hacienda. Their donation helped fulfill the recreation and parks obligations associated with the creation of the Old Palm Grove.

The CRA bought the half lot next to the donated land and deeded it to the city, which will maintain the 10,400-square-foot park. The CRA spent \$185,000 to equip the park with a picnic table, park benches, the playground, a bike rack, new landscaping and lighting.

Also, a sidewalk connects Old Palm Grove with La Hacienda. Residents have access to a trail that provides residents of both neighborhoods the chance to get to the beach by bike or foot without ever having to face the traffic on Federal Highway.

"The great thing here is that we get a chance to make a connection with all our neighbors," Augustyn said. "If it weren't for projects like this, all you could really do is make circles in your own development."