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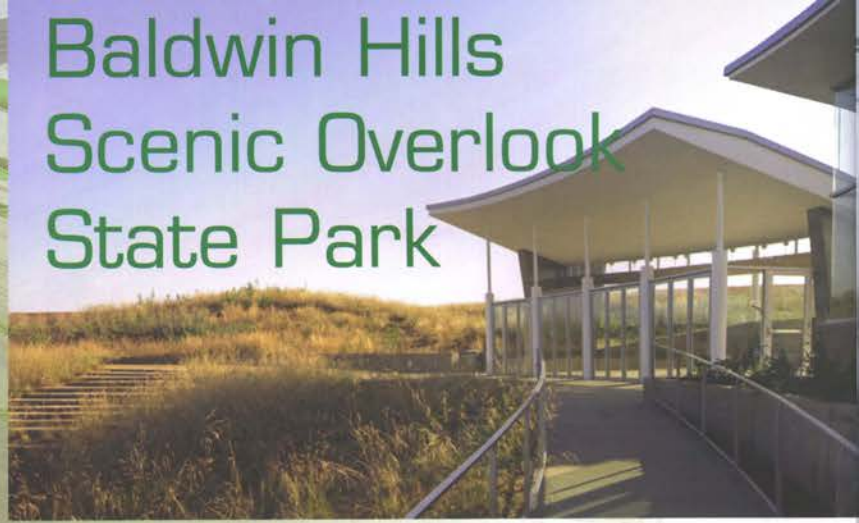
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# Baldwin Hills Scenic Overlook State Park



**Bringing parks to where people and communities need them most is a key component of good urban and land use planning, public health policy and open space and resource management. Such park development projects, when guided and implemented with solid planning and top-notch design can subsequently bring together park and open space managers and community leaders toward a much clearer understanding of their interrelated and co-beneficial relationships.**

For Los Angelenos, never has this been, or can be seen, more clearly than at Baldwin Hills Scenic Overlook, a new 57-acre California State Park property located in suburban Culver City and the adjacent Los Angeles neighborhoods of Baldwin Hills and Ladera Heights. California State Parks, the nation's largest state park system recently opened this new unit into this park-starved urban region (recent figures indicate less than one acre of open-space per thousand Los Angeles residents). Over the last decade the California State Parks

department has made a concerted effort to bring its resource-based parks mission to the heavily urbanized cores of the state. In the Los Angeles basin Baldwin Hills Scenic Overlook is one of three new state parks (Rio de Los Angeles State Park and Los Angeles State Historic Park being the other two) that are direct results of the department's "Urban Strategic Initiative." State Parks recent efforts in Los Angeles come from both internal recognition of relevancy and service to California's urban residents and the coordinated efforts of local activists, legislators, agencies, and community leaders who demanded the benefits of resource-based state parks for their residents and constituents.

Baldwin Hills Scenic Overlook is a perfect example of such a coordinated effort. Over a decade ago, local residents banded together with agencies, such as the state's Baldwin Hills Conservancy, to deter and subsequently stop a proposed 230 house residential development project for this property. With the undeveloped hilltop property already graded and slated for building, these local activists convinced both local

and state decision-makers and legislators that the exclusive hilltop housing development was far less valuable to the community than the preservation and revitalization of this small piece of remaining open space. The coalition lobbied legislators for a park and in 2000 California State Parks used \$41.1 million in statewide park bond funds to purchase the property from the previous owners, at that time a record per acre price for Los Angeles park land (only to be eclipsed by the purchase of Los Angeles State Historic Park in downtown a year later).



*North facing glass walls great view of the Southern Californian Sunrise*

State Park planners and consultants quickly moved to assess their new property. Working with the Baldwin Hills Conservancy and local community leaders State Parks pushed to complete a general plan for a new park. Unlike many of the 278 California state parks that had come previously, the turbulent land use history of the Baldwin Hills site, from oil wells to pre-residential development grading had appeared to have stripped this small set of hills of natural resource values generally associated with the venerable state park system. Yet, planners and park managers soon recognized the inherent value of the open space acreage in park poor Los Angeles and the even greater realization of the site's ultimate resource value—an over 300 degree view, at nearly 500 feet above, the Los Angeles basin below. From this unique, central vantage point, the megalopolis that is urban Los Angeles can be seen from a vividly contrasting perspective of the open space of Baldwin Hills Scenic Overlook—a view not previously available to most locals.

As such the principal goal of the Park's general plan is to preserve and enhance the unique resource values of this rare open space and vista property in Los Angeles through the restoration of its natural ecosystems while creating a harmonious balance between needed recreational facilities and activities that would draw and engage the local



kitchen, and the third is an outdoor pavilion for special events that spills out onto an outdoor amphitheater formed from recycled concrete surrounded by landscape exhibits of native plants.

Avoiding the temptation from some proponents to place the visitor center at the height of the overlook, the design team tucked the visitor center unobtrusively into a hollow below the overlook summit, helping make the park more accessible while also protecting the visual integrity of the park's ultimate viewshed resource. Key design components are the buildings' curving forms that emulate the sculptural landforms of the site and the staggered curving butterfly roofs, which bring light down into the structures above the large polished concrete retaining walls. In addition floor to ceiling windows open the visitor center towards the natural landscape and expansive views of the city beyond.

Visitors arriving via automobile travel up a slow winding drive that provides a passenger drop-off round-a-bout or leads to the parking area placed beyond and behind the complex. A gently sloped but accessible walkway leads visitors from the parking lot towards the Visitor Center and through the interior and exterior exhibit spaces. An accessible path then leads past the outdoor amphitheater and rises through a series of engineered, but naturally appearing, landscape berms up the hill towards the overlook. The berms have been formed to restrict the full overlook view for the visitor until their immediate arrival at the observation deck where the awe-inspiring vista is dramatically revealed.

Pedestrian visitors to the park arriving along Jefferson Boulevard below can also scale the hill to the overlook via a winding, switchback hiking trail. The multi-switchback trail is bisected with a steeper staircase made of recycled concrete for the more fit and adventurous climbers and includes several landing areas for rest and enjoyment of the varied views for those ascending or descending from the overlook. One of these landings includes embedded interpretive messages in the hardscape features.

The visitor experience at Baldwin Hills Scenic Overlook is also enhanced through educational themes and messages found in the interpretive exhibits at the park. The exhibits look to fulfill the park's interpretive objectives for promoting awareness of the values both tangible and spiritual

that places such as Baldwin Hills can provide in highly urbanized areas such as Los Angeles. Such messages are found most directly in the Visitor Center. Here, through a series of fixed, interactive and audio visual exhibits, visitors are introduced to the natural resource origins of the Los Angeles basin; its phenomenal urban and economic growth fueled from this natural bounty; the natural, societal, and environmental conflicts that arose from its exponential growth; and how open space parks like Baldwin Hills Scenic Overlook can help to provide balance for such urbanized communities. This contextual background, including its brief history of land development in Los Angeles, helps to reinforce for visitors the symbolic value of Baldwin Hills as they experience the physical enormity of the dense urban landscape below them.

Baldwin Hills Scenic Overlook and Visitor Center opened to the public in April 2009. Visitors, both local and regional can now come daily to experience a welcome respite from their urban world and to hopefully obtain a "new view" on Los Angeles. State Parks continues to work with other local agencies and associations such as the Baldwin Hills Conservancy, Los Angeles Audubon Society, and local environmental companies including Earthworks Restoration Inc. and nearby schools such as Dorsey High to help raise funds,



provide programming support and participate in park restoration activities. It has already become both an educational and a community resource for these previously park-poor communities. A place where local high school students come not only to learn about, but participate in, the restoration of coastal sage scrub habitat. Such life-informing experiences are sure to bring environmental messages and lessons straight into the heart, minds, and fabric of these urban communities—and for the benefit of State Parks—the urban residents discovering the inherent values of resource and natural open space parks. Such experiences are a symbiotic relationship that a 21st century state park system and its urban constituents cannot survive without.

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