City officially opens Norma Hertzog Community Center and Lions Park Playground

On Saturday July 17, the City of Costa Mesa unveiled to the community the new Norma Hertzog Community Center and the reinvigorated Lions Park Playground (Airplane Park), marking the final chapter on a $36.5 million, world-class campus that has quickly become the jewel of Costa Mesa's Westside.

"On Saturday, we officially opened the Norma Hertzog Community Center and the Lions Park Playground," Mayor John Stephens said. "This completes the Lions Park Project, which is the largest capital improvement project in Costa Mesa's history. It is wonderful to see so many residents and visitors enjoying these new community assets as they will for generations to come."

The ribbon-cutting ceremony began at 10 a.m. at the Norma Hertzog Community Center, named in honor of Costa Mesa's first woman council member and mayor, and concluded at the Lions Park Playground, where city officials welcomed visitors to the see the newly engineered Korean War-era Panther Jet.



Photos courtesy of Ashley Fisher

In a special moment, attendees heard from former Mayor Hertzog, who had pre-taped a video greeting and then appeared briefly on the center's two new big screens to greet the crowd virtually via Zoom.

City Manager Lori Ann Farrell Harrison emceed the event and gave special thanks to Public Services Director Raja Sethuraman, who led the project construction. Other city officials attending were Assistant City Manager Susan Price, Police Chief Bryan Glass, IT Director Steve Ely, Finance Director Carol Molina and Parks & Community Services Director Jason Minter.

Council Member Arlis Reynolds, who represents District 5 where the park is located, celebrated both the park opening and coincidentally her birthday that day.

"It was such a joy, and the best birthday gift I could ask for, to see our downtown Lions Park campus – including the library, the new community center, Airplane Park, and all the open spaces thriving with so many smiling Costa Mesa faces," Council Member Reynolds said. "Many of my favorite childhood memories are from this campus, and so many generations of

Costa Mesans have stories here. The Lions Park campus will be home again to many more happy memories!”

Several hundred members of the community attended the event as well as VIPs that included four former Costa Mesa mayors Arlene Scheafer, Mary Hornbuckle, now County Supervisor Katrina Foley and Ed McFarland.





Photos courtesy of Ashley Fisher

“I couldn’t be happier with the outcome,” Supervisor Foley

said. “It was so important to me to name the beautiful community center after Costa Mesa’s first female mayor, Norma Hertzog, as there were no buildings in Costa Mesa named after a woman. I loved seeing the Lions Park playground transformed from a site that families avoided to one filled with kids playing joyfully this weekend. Costa Mesa is better because of this project.”

Also in attendance were dignitaries and community leaders, including Assembly Member Cottie Petrie Norris, who helped secure $1 million in state funding for the park improvements.

“I’m so proud to have secured $1 million for the revitalization of Lions Park,” said Assemblywoman Petrie-Norris. “The new playground is an incredible interactive experience for kids and Lions Park is now the jewel of Costa Mesa. I can’t wait to see families come and gather together in community.”

The new Community Center features a 330-person capacity main assembly room and 100 person-capacity conference room, upgraded restrooms and a catering kitchen. It also features state of the art technology for special events.

The Lions Park Playground features a new airplane-themed play area with swing sets, a zip line, double-duo see saws and most importantly the refurbished historic Panther Jet that has been a fixture of the park for decades.

The Panther Jet was refurbished by Capt. Vic Bakkila and several volunteers including Pete “the pirate” Carolin, Cindy Brenneman, Sue Lester and Beth Refakes.





Photos courtesy of Ashley Fisher

The improvements include new restrooms and open lawn areas, modern playground equipment and rubberized surface and sand play areas. Other park infrastructure upgrades include storm drain and irrigation improvements, new site lighting, landscaping and concrete pathways.

The opening of the Community Center and Playground marked the completion of Phase 2 of the City’s Capital Improvement

Project that began in June of 2017. Phase 1 included the new 23,615-square-foot Donald Dungan Library that was opened to the public in May of 2019.

The design of both the library and community center, which was formerly the Donald Dungan Library, was completed by the Southern California-based architectural firm Johnson Favaro and the construction was managed by Costa Mesa's Public Services Department and the Tovey/Shultz construction firm.

Along with the new Donald Dungan Library, Phase 1 of the project included a one-acre park with 25,000-square-feet of programmable grass area. The facility is owned by the City and library services are provided by Orange County Public Libraries.

A total of 225 new trees have been planted in Lions Park, which is the city's oldest park, as part of this project. Both the Donald Dungan Library and Norma Hertzog Community Center are LEED Gold Certified. Costa Mesa is the only city in Orange County and fourth in the state that is LEED Gold Certified.