

LOCAL

Grayson's community park is 20 years old. Here's what residents say it needs

By Kathleen Quinn

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John X Mataka tests play equipment at Grayson's United Community Park July 24, 2025

When Stanislaus County opened Grayson's United Community Center and Park 20 years ago, it was a game-changer for a community with almost no resources. But now, the hand-me-down play equipment and pockmarked soccer fields no longer meet the community's needs.

John X Mataka, a longtime community leader in Grayson, said that since the park opened, it's become a community hub in an area largely isolated from major development elsewhere in the county.

"We're out here in the middle of nowhere and as the saying goes, out of sight, out of mind," Mataka said.

In front of the community center is the only business in town, a faded One Stop gas station and market that serves as the community's grocery store but lacks fresh meat and vegetables.

Lilia Lomeli-Gil, who has lived in Grayson for 20 years, said the area in front of the community center used to be lush. Now, the trees are dying and the grass has become a wheat-yellow.

“For a while there, all of this was beautiful,” Lomeli-Gil said. “During the drought, the watering stopped and that’s when the gophers invaded.”

The soccer field is uneven and riddled with small divots.

“We asked one of the local farmers to bring some soil so we could cover the gopher holes,” Lomeli-Gil said. “The kids playing out there would twist their ankles and have to jump over the holes that were filled with water from when they watered the field.”



in Grayson, Thursday, July 24, 2025.

Tera Chumley, director of Stanislaus County Parks and Recreation, said the county is aware of the gopher problems, which are affecting a few of the county parks.

“The challenge is, I believe, that that particular park is near agriculture and that’s where the gophers come from,” Chumley said. “It’s a problem that will always be there – as soon as you fill the holes and fix the issue, the gophers will be back, unfortunately.”

The plastic playground equipment at the park wasn't new when it was installed in 2005, but the once brightly colored slides and climbing walls have faded in the sun and a bubble-window that used to be part of one of the play structures has been removed.



Lilia Lomeli-Gil picks a piece of wood out of her shoe at Grayson United Community Park July 24, 2025.

The woodchips, which Lomeli-Gil said get replaced every few years, can be sharp, as evidenced by one piece wedged into her shoe as she toured the grounds.

Chumley said the department has been in regular contact to understand the Grayson community's requests.

"We're looking forward to continuing the dialogue and seeing what we can do to keep them active and keep the improvement coming," Chumley said.

Grayson's youth speak up

During a Stanislaus County Board of Supervisors meeting on July 22, the parks and recreation department gave a presentation celebrating changes and improvements made throughout the county. Shortly thereafter, Grayson's Youth Advocacy Group provided public comment pressing for improvements and a list of demands.

Luchie Sanchez, one of three leaders of the Youth Advocacy Group, referred to green binders handed out to the supervisors and directed them towards images he took.

“If you guys could shift your attention to Patterson, it’s what most people would expect from a park. It’s clean, well taken care of, with green areas and paths surrounding it. These parks include shaded areas to protect people from the sun during hot days and the play structures that are shown are big enough for all ages to enjoy,” Sanchez said. “Unlike Grayson, as you can see, the play structures have lost their color and appear very dull which makes it look very uninviting.”



Basketball court at United Community Park overlooking a vacant field in Grayson, Thursday, July 24, 2025.

In the last few years, there has been a local soccer tournament in honor of a police officer, Dennis Wallace. Most recently, Grayson dominated while playing on the non-regulation-sized field of uneven ground.

“Out here in this makeshift soccer field – the team out here had 13 wins and no losses,” Mataka said. “That’s huge for a small community like ourselves and something to be proud of.”

Jose Manuel Cervantes, a 17-year-old member of the Youth Advocacy Group and coach of the youth soccer team that won the championship, stood in front of the board of supervisors and asked for the park renovation as a way to encourage more people to go outside.

“I feel like if we do this, our park would be in better shape and my kids won’t have to worry about getting hurt, and their parents wouldn’t have to worry about their kids getting hurt all the time,” Cervantes said.

The park serves not just Grayson children, tweens and teens, but also the nearby communities of unincorporated Westley and Vernalis.

“These young people need their requests filled because it keeps them out of trouble,” Mataka said. “This keeps them on the right path, several of these young people are going to college as a result of this center and this park.”

Sanchez said it took a lot of effort for the youth members to go before the board of supervisors, many of them were nervous. “It’s hard to speak, especially when you’re young.”

Leroy F. Fitzsimmons park, a small park in Grayson built in the 1990s, is geared toward toddlers and is getting an update near the end of next month, but United Community Park isn’t scheduled for upgrades until 2028, according to the county.

“I did check with our parks manager and he assured me that the playground does get inspected monthly and if there’s any repairs that need to be made, they’re made immediately,” Chumley said.

A blue metal bench close to the playground was rusted to the point of coming apart, creating a possible safety issue. Chumley said she was not aware of who installed the benches, since most of the benches that Stanislaus County installs are either wood or concrete, but she would have to look into the issue.



A rusted metal bench at United Community Park in Grayson, Thursday, July 24, 2025.

The community center is vital

The center has partnered with nonprofits like El Concilio and Valley Improvement Projects. They have been working with partners on mental health and wellness, after-school programs and the “Young at Heart” senior program.

Mataka said Grayson hosts the only Spanish-speaking “Young at Heart” program in the county.

“And that’s key really,” Mataka said. “What makes it so important is not only do they get a meal but it’s the socialization, the exercise – the fall prevention.”

Many of the improvements the park has seen have come from local partners, including farmers and nonprofits donating their time and resources, though the nets for the soccer field were recently replaced by the county after receiving a grant.

The soccer goals built in honor of long-time Patterson Irrigator journalist, Maddy Houk, are now rusted over.



United Community Park soccer pitch in Grayson, Thursday, July 24, 2025.

Lomeli-Gil said local ATV users drive their vehicles up onto the soccer field.

Chumley said she is aware of the issue and has encouraged community members to contact the Stanislaus County Sheriff’s Office when they see them.

A long-shot, but something that organizers wanted to throw into the mix, is the possibility of purchasing the vacant lot next to the park to expand.

“We had been throwing it out there to them, but it doesn’t seem like that is going anywhere,” Mataka said.

Chumley said the presentation received by the board of supervisors was the first she had heard about the interest in having the county purchase the land, but that they are focused on maintaining what they already have, not expanding at this time.

Mataka said what’s most important is that the center and park act as a welcoming environment for the whole region.

“If you go to Patterson, look at their parks; they have very nice parks. You go to Modesto, look at their parks – they’re very nice parks,” Mataka said. “But when you’re out in a rural area, you know, it’s easy to get neglected.”



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