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News

New park promising stunning Bay views takes big step forward



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The Bridge Yard Building is photographed in the morning light in Oakland, Calif., on Friday, Dec. 15, 2017. The California Department of Transportation and East Bay Regional Park District will sign a lease for the historic, newly restored Bridge Yard Building on Friday. The signing of the lease is an important step in moving forward with the planned Gateway Park, a future 170-acre shoreline park located at the foot of the Bay Bridge. (Laura A. Oda/Bay Area News Group)

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OAKLAND — A major new shoreline park planned to have meadows, beaches, expansive views of the Bay and easy access to a Bay Bridge trail took a major step forward Friday.

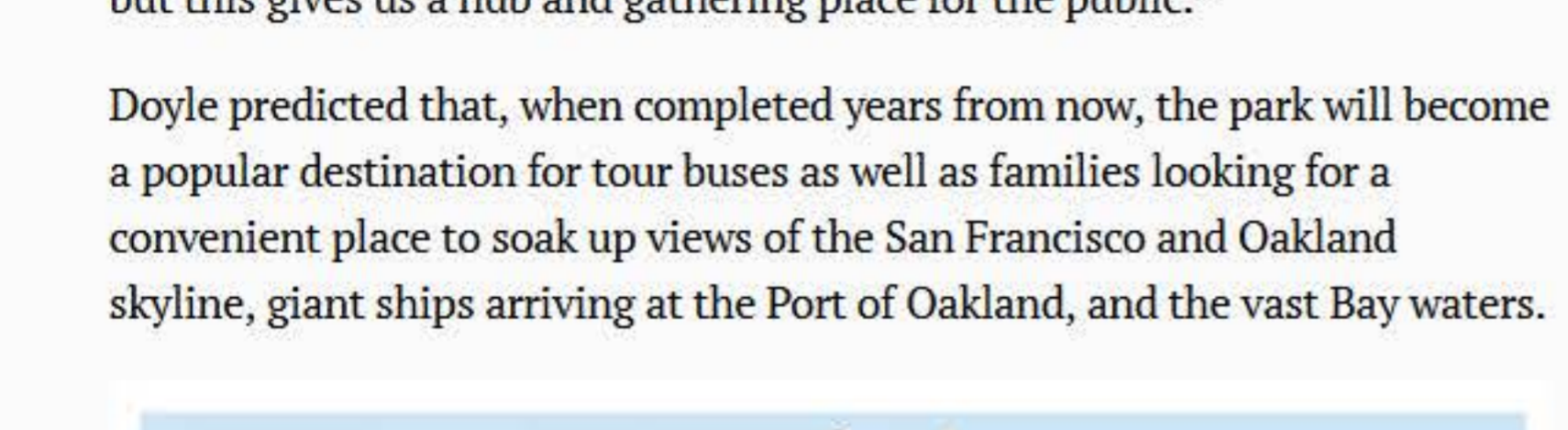
A historical train shop building at the foot of the Bay Bridge officially became a hub for the new Gateway Park after the structure was restored for \$9 million into a park visitor and conference center.

Top officials from the East Bay Regional Park District and Caltrans signed papers on Friday enabling the park district to lease the new park center for 10 years without paying rent.

The agreement is a shot in the arm for long-awaited plans by nine agencies to develop the shoreline park as a major shoreline destination, officials said

“This park will be a gateway to the East Bay and its shoreline where the public can enjoy incredible views of San Francisco Bay, and take trails to hike or bike along the shoreline,” said Bob Doyle, general manager of the East Bay Regional Park District. “We have a lot of work and planning to do, but this gives us a hub and gathering place for the public.”

Doyle predicted that, when completed years from now, the park will become a popular destination for tour buses as well as families looking for a convenient place to soak up views of the San Francisco and Oakland skyline, giant ships arriving at the Port of Oakland, and the vast Bay waters.



The park will cover between 45 and 170 acres, much of it former U.S. Army base and Caltrans property, and cost perhaps as much as \$170 million, according to 2013 planning documents prepared by the Bay Area Toll Authority.

Park planners are considering developing warming huts, a coffee or snack shop, large-scale sculptures, a concert meadow, a rock climbing wall, a kayak launch area, and a boardwalk to view wildlife.

The first element of the Gateway Park, a hiking and riding trail along the eastern half of the new Bay Bridge, opened in March of 2014. Progress on other elements has been slow as nine agencies try to define what to develop without having money lined up yet. It could take many years to finish the park.

The new visitor and conference center isn't ready yet for drop-in visitors, but it provides a hub for the whole Gateway Park, said Andrew Fremier, the deputy executive officer of the Bay Area Toll Authority.

“It will be a starting point for everyone who wants to stop here,” Fremier said in a ceremony inside the 24,000-square-foot Bridge Yard building just south of the Bay Bridge.

The center already has several large exhibits on Bay Area bridge history, and how the Bridge Yard building was used until the late 1950s as a maintenance shop for the Key System electric trains that carried 36.4 million passengers a year across the bridge in 1945. Competition from automobiles hurt the private electric train system and it closed, officials said.

Other exhibits on the Bay environment will be placed later in the center.

Caltrans, which owns the building, agreed to lease it for free. The Toll Authority provided the \$9 million building restoration funds and also agreed to provide \$150,000 a year to maintain the structure, and to consider providing other funds to add bathrooms and a commercial kitchen to accommodate conferences and special events.

“Caltrans signing of the lease is a big step in showing cooperation and good faith that they're placing a state asset for public use in the Gateway Park,” said Karen Betts, a toll authority spokeswoman

In another phase of the park, Caltrans is considering saving some of the last five foundation piers from the old Bay Bridge so they can be retrofitted as viewing platforms to see the Bay. Other piers from the old Bay Bridge were blown up in underwater detonations.

“I think it's a good way to provide public access to the Bay,” said Bijan Sartipi, Caltrans regional director, adding his agency will do more studies before deciding to save the piers.

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Early next year, a draft environmental impact report is scheduled to be released on a full range of alternatives for possible features in the Gateway Park, toll authority staffers said. Even after the report is done, it may take years for decisions to be made on all the elements in the park, they added.

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