

**Contra Costa County
and the East Bay Regional Park District
Celebrate a Golden Anniversary**

1964-2014

By Ned MacKay and Beverly Lane

June 2 of this year marked the 50th anniversary of a major milestone in East Bay Regional Park District's history: annexation of Contra Costa County.

When the District was first established by public vote back in 1934, it included seven cities in Alameda County. At the time the Contra Costa County Board of Supervisors declined to support the election in its jurisdiction. The county was predominately rural and farmers opposed being taxed for parks.

Although Contra Costa saw extensive residential and commercial development after World War II, parks for these new residents were not a county priority. The Board did appoint a County Parks Commission in the early sixties and put a park bond issue on the ballot in 1962 which failed to get the required 2/3 vote.

However, tempo for County parks picked up substantially in 1962 with the appointment of William Penn Mott, Jr. as the Regional Park District's general manager. A visionary with boundless energy, Mott made the welcoming of Contra Costa into the Park District fold one of his major goals.

Several groups and leading citizens enlisted in the cause. The Contra Costa Park and Recreation Council led by Al Burton was one. Others were Robert Kahn, a member of the County Grand Jury, Clark Kerr, president of the University of California, his wife Kay (who later founded Save the Bay), and Mayor Leonard Grote of Pleasant Hill. Assemblyman John Knox of Richmond urged support.



Las Trampas Regional Wilderness



John Nejedly (left), district attorney and county counsel for Contra Costa County, and Hulet Hornbeck display a map of the planned Briones Regional Park.

To organize the campaign for voter approval, Mott directed his public affairs manager, Dick Trudeau, to do what needed to be done. Hulet Hornbeck, active with the Park Council and later the District's Land Acquisition manager, was chairman of the campaign's Central Contra Costa committee. George Cardinet, dean of the local equestrian community, was finance chair for the campaign. Sally Germain headed the Danville effort.

It was not an easy sell. The county agricultural interests were still skeptical. Opposition at the eastern end of the county was so strong that the Liberty Union High School District was left out of the boundary. That area didn't annex to the EBRPD until 1981.

As the June 2 election neared, Mott and Trudeau embarked on marathon speaking tours, enjoining anyone who would listen to support annexation. "Not a single picnic table in Contra Costa County" became a campaign slogan. "Citizens for Regional Parks Now!" distributed a campaign brochure urging a yes vote, "before the wilderness beauty is destroyed and land cost becomes prohibitively high."

Final results fortunately did not require a 2/3 vote. Measure B on the June 2 ballot carried the day with 54 percent in favor, 46 percent opposed. Mott credited grass roots support for the victory. "The citizens groups who got behind us made the difference," he said.

The first two new regional parks to be opened were Kennedy Grove in El Sobrante and Briones near Pleasant Hill. Las Trampas Regional Wilderness purchases began in 1966. And the first part of Richmond's Brooks Island was bought in 1968. State Park bonds, approved in 1964, were an important source of funds for these parks.

In 2014, the EBRPD manages 115,000 acres of regional parks. The county's expansive regional park system now includes three visitor centers, the Contra Loma reservoir and lagoon, several major regional trails, Black Diamond Mines Regional Preserve, shoreline parks and large open spaces which now amount to 57,450 acres in Contra Costa.



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Photos

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Nejedly and Hornbeck:
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