

INTRODUCTION

The San Francisco Bay Area is uniquely blessed with parkland resources. It has been estimated that an acre of public parkland exists for every ten Bay Area residents - a ratio unmatched by any other major metropolitan area in the United States.

We hope that an examination of these parklands in the East Bay area - currently over 50,000 acres in Alameda and Contra Costa Counties - will contribute to an understanding and awareness of park planning and management considerations. Such an examination, including facets of vegetation management, transportation issues and park-site analyses, is the goal of this seminar.

A GENERAL PERSPECTIVE ON EAST BAY PARKLANDS

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History

The East Bay Regional Park District (EBRPD) is a tax-supported regional agency operating in parts of Alameda and Contra Costa Counties (Map 1, Frontispiece). Under the California Public Resources Code it is empowered, among other things, to ". . . acquire land, to plan, develop and operate a system of public parks, playgrounds, golf courses, beaches, trails, natural areas, ecological and open space preserves, parkways, scenic drives, boulevards, and other facilities for public recreation . . . for the use and enjoyment of all the inhabitants of the District. . . ." (p. 6).⁴ EBRPD serves as the unit of county government for Parks and Recreation for both Contra Costa and Alameda Counties.

EBRPD was formed in the early 1930's by voters in Alameda County - its first parks included the Redwood and Tilden Regional Parks. Contra Costa County was added to the District in 1964, and EBRPD has grown to the point where it now owns or administers roughly 50,000 acres of parkland in its two-county area. Much of this land has been acquired relatively recently.

In 1970, EBRPD determined that its funds were inadequate for simultaneously managing its existing parklands and acquiring new park sites. As a result of lobbying efforts, the California Legislature in 1971 authorized the District to increase its tax rate to make additional revenues available to the District for park acquisition and expansion. This additional revenue, collected over the past five years, has allowed EBRPD greatly to expand its parkland inventory. As of 1978, the District owns 39 parks, 31 of which are open to the public (pre-Jarvis-Gann).

Half of the 1971 tax increase was made contingent upon the District's adopting a 'Master Plan' which would spell out the District's plans for parkland acquisition and development programs for the next one to two decades. The District adopted such a Master Plan in 1973.

Regarding EBRPD's acquisition policies, the Master Plan states that one of the District's primary goals is a balanced system of parks - one with an equitable distribution of parklands that are designed to reflect

the needs and desires of all District residents.⁴ The result has been quite a varied inventory of parklands, which include shoreline parks, regional wilderness, and nature preserves, in addition to recreation areas.

Parks and Their Social Context

By providing the space and opportunity for recreational activities, parks serve an important function in society. They possess the potential to satisfy a whole realm of human needs, besides the fairly obvious satisfaction of physiological needs. Through such activities as hiking, running, and group sports, recreation can also afford tangible social and psychological benefits. Many park users attain a sense of "renewment" by being able, if only temporarily, to escape the pressure and responsibilities of day-to-day living. Also, parks can serve as sites of social intercourse and interaction - hence the notion of parks as cultural landscapes.

However, while these recreational values - physical release, psychological satisfaction, social interaction - are universal, parks themselves can vary tremendously from society to society: note how different American parks are from Japanese or Swedish parks. And, of course, parks can exhibit a great deal of variety in form and function within a given society. With this in mind, it is enlightening to look at American regional parks in the social context in which they have developed.

In the past, the context of American park formation, and American growth in general, has been expansion into space. This distinctively Western ideology is based upon the idea that space is a plentiful commodity, as seemingly inexhaustible as the air we breathe. Virgin America essentially served as a pressure release for European population growth in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries; this migration bred a 'frontier ethic.' Whenever a population group or subgroup encountered unwanted pressures or unfulfilled needs and desires - population pressure from neighbors and immigrants, a desire to own land - it almost always had the option of moving to open spaces. The result of this ethic of land as a limitless resource, when coupled with the development and general affordability of the automobile, was reflected in the growth patterns of American cities. After the initial core of a city was formed, successive growth tended not to be concentrated centrally, but rather to be directed radially outward. As pressures for land were encountered - for housing and commercial development, and to an extent industrial development - they were often translated into suburban growth: thus the notion of 'suburban sprawl.' The resultant template for American city growth, then, has been in general an urban core surrounded by low-density suburbs.

The East Bay Regional Park District was born and raised, as it were, in this context of suburban growth. This history has been reflected in the District's acquisition policies, which have been oriented chiefly towards residents of Alameda and Contra Costa County suburbs. Recognizing that mobility is no problem for these suburban people, because of their high percentage of automobile ownership, EBRPD has had the luxury of acquiring land that is not necessarily near population centers. Thus, EBRPD parks have tended to be large, remote areas of land. An example is Tilden Park, which caused a furor at the time it was opened in 1936, because to many people it seemed too far from downtown Berkeley. This acquisition orientation is noted in the Master Plan: "Generally, (EBRPD) parklands serve a zone within a one-hour driving time" (p. 27).⁴

As we shall see, one might question whether such EBRPD policy orientation - with an emphasis towards those who have access to automobiles - begets a system of parks that functions equitably for all District residents, or rather one where some urban residents in the East Bay are in effect excluded from use of the District's parks.

EBRPD Users

Keeping in mind that social institutions (such as park districts) are developed in a particular social context, it becomes useful to look at the consequences of changes in that context. Although any planning policy would by definition seem to be cognizant of the future and her unexpected vagaries, this is not always so. Often planning tends only to mirror present-day policies, the status quo, rather than to anticipate the future. For planning purposes, change should be regarded as an integral component of future realities and problems.⁸ When change isn't so regarded, myopic planning can lead to unsatisfactory and over-costly solutions to future problems; in extreme cases, unpreparedness can preclude the fabrication of any effective response at all.

EBRPD seems to be aware of the need for looking ahead. The Master Plan, approved in 1973, is intended to guide EBRPD parkland acquisition and development programs for the next one to two decades. More recently, the District commissioned Tyler Research Associates, Inc. to conduct a need and demand survey in order to, in part, evaluate the various facilities and services provided by the District, and to collect demographic information about users and non-users for District program planning. The study concluded that "the (population) sub-groups which are underrepresented among EBRPD park users are the segment 65 years of age and older, and the segment without access to an automobile" (p. xiv).¹⁰ The study further concludes that "the East Bay Regional Park District is doing an excellent job of attracting a large and representative number of District residents to its parks. . . ." (p. xiv).¹⁰ The study plays down any contradiction between these two conclusions by noting that "substantial majorities of residents from all educational and income levels, age categories, racial sub-groups, and all other demographic categories use the EBRPD parks" (p. vii).¹⁰

However, there seems to exist some evidence to the contrary. The more recent National Urban Recreation Study (prepared by the Bureau of Outdoor Recreation) notes that "a substantial percentage of urban residents in the Bay Area, over 50 percent in San Francisco and Oakland, are transit dependent for access to recreation areas. The lack of public transit is so acute that many of these people are effectively precluded from enjoying the large regional parks and natural areas" (p. 10).² Indeed, it has been succinctly observed that "the phrase 'only a short drive away' is bitterly ironic for those who are without cars, or money to pay for transit, or those who are generally immobile" (p. 62).⁵

The general pattern of metropolitan growth tends to leave the inner cities to the hard-core unemployed, the uneducated, the elderly, and the disadvantaged: just those people who often tend to have little or no access to private transportation. Added to this is the fact that public transit systems in the Bay Area

do not function adequately as an alternative to the automobile for those seeking to use the regional parks. These public transit systems generally provide quick and efficient service within Bay Area commercial centers, but the provision of similar services to major Bay Area parks and recreation areas has largely been ignored.² This trend seems likely to continue. We see, then, that exclusion from use of the District regional parks by Bay Area urban residents without automobiles is indeed a pressing concern (see p.

EBRPD has until recently concentrated chiefly on large tracts of land in the East Bay hills. In the past few years, however, it has begun to pay increasing attention to the Bay shoreline as a recreational resource (see p.). This in turn places more emphasis on providing convenient recreational opportunities to residents of concentrated urban areas.

Still, given the distances involved and problems of access to transportation, the Bureau of Recreation's study indicates that the District's regional parks are utilized mainly by suburban residents of middle-and-above income levels.² To obtain a parity of park use by all District residents, the EBRPD regional parks must be made more accessible to urban residents, particularly minorities and the elderly. This accessibility must hold true both for the means by which urban residents can get to the regional parks, and for an increased awareness of the availability of these recreational resources (p. 5).² Only then will the EBRPD truly be said to be providing, as worded in the Master Plan, ". . . recreation opportunities . . . to all classes and groups of District residents" (p. 2).⁴

Future Considerations

The EBRPD will in the future be serving an increasingly urban constituency, one different from today's, in terms of both demographic composition and spatial distribution. In 1975, the Bay Area had a population of 4.8 million people; the projected figures for the year 2000 are 5.4 to 6.1 million people.¹ Almost one third will reside within EBRPD's jurisdiction (Table 1). Population will increase quite a bit faster annually in Contra Costa County than in Alameda County.

One particularly important demographic consideration for the District is the percentage of the population that is over age 65. In 1975, the figure was around 11% (approximately 525,000 people) in the Bay Area; projections for the year 2000 hover around 13%-14% (700,000-860,000 people).¹ The percent is increasing, in part, because today's population is weighted with a sizable number of middle-aged people who migrated to the Bay Area

	Contra Costa	Alameda
<u>Population</u>		
1975	582,800	1,089,000
1990	690,500 - 774,300	1,163,400 - 1,180,300
Annual Growth	1.1%-1.9%	.4%-.5%

Table 1. Future District Population Growth

Source: ABAG's Provisional 'Series 3' Projections; the Bay Area Air Quality Management Plan; State of California Department of Finance.

in the 1960's. This is important, because old people are often less self-reliant, both physically and financially, than are their younger counterparts. This can have definite effects on their abilities to travel and recreate. Also, in many cases, older people have different recreational needs. Because of physical limitations, recreational facilities serving the elderly must be fairly concentrated in area. In addition, more park supervision is needed for recreation by the elderly, because of safety and health considerations. EBRPD has shown itself to be aware of the East Bay's population of elderly; the District has developed an outreach program to serve its older citizens. However, the District will find that it must place a greater emphasis in the future on meeting the needs of its growing elderly constituency.

Besides future population increases, the District will encounter stronger and stronger competition in acquiring land, because of urbanization demands. Regarding future land use, ABAG and the Bay Area Air Pollution Control District (BAAPCD) in 1975 conducted a survey of vacant usable land in the Bay Area.¹ They found that of the land available by 1990 for residential, commercial, and industrial development in Alameda County, less than 10% will still be vacant; in Contra Costa County, less than 15%. There are several important ramifications. One is that it can be assumed there will be increased constraints on private automobile use, as the price of fuel continues to rise, and air pollution becomes an even more pressing problem. This means that EBRPD must begin looking now at alternative means of transport to and from its parks.

Given the encroachments of urbanization, it has been suggested that, in the future, EBRPD parks might have to serve functions other than just as recreation areas.⁶ A benefit of the open space provided by the District regional parks in general is a degree of ecosystem protection. Such space provides a continuum for a variety of plant and animal habitats; also conserved are other natural entities, such as geologic features and watershed lands. However, given the expected scarcity and expense of land in the decades to come, EBRPD may be forced to compromise this ecosystem protection by allowing dual park uses. One future scenario is that District lands might have to serve as sites for solid waste disposal. Another possible use is as sites of energy generation, such as solar or wind energy.⁶ Even if only in a general manner, EBRPD must begin to plan its future acquisitions with such possibilities in mind, no matter how farfetched they may seem now. In this vein of looking to the future, it has been suggested that EBRPD should maintain an earthquake contingency fund so that when (not if!) the next major earthquake hits the Bay Area, the District would be in a position to buy land along the earthquake faults. Presumably such land would be cheaper after an earthquake had caused serious damage to the housing and buildings on it; also, after such a dramatic disaster, the desirability of maintaining linear parks, instead of rebuilding on the earthquake fault lines, would be much more obvious.⁷

EBRPD should also consider planning its future acquisitions so as to contribute to a Bay Area 'greenbelt system.' A regional greenbelt consists of an extensive system of open space which is deliberately preserved to surround and support a metropolitan area. The term 'greenbelt' is important because it emphasizes the crucial need for defining an inner open space edge bordering the urban areas of the East Bay. As such, a greenbelt shapes and contains urban development by separating communities and metropolitan regions, thus blocking sprawl and preventing inefficient urbanization.⁹ The District is primarily a park and recreation

agency. Recently, the District has begun to purchase lands whose primary value is as open space. These areas, which are identified as 'regional wilderness' areas by the Master Plan, are essentially undeveloped lands having potential for very low-density recreational uses, such as hiking, riding, and backcountry camping. These undeveloped lands have an intriguing potential to contribute to such a permanent Bay Area greenbelt. If future acquisitions were planned, at least in part, in coordination with other agencies such as People for Open Space, facilitation of such a greenbelt system for the East Bay would be greatly enhanced.

Perhaps such a contribution to a greenbelt system is too Herculean a task to ask of EBRPD, which is after all a park and recreation district. However, given our urban future, recreation planning that includes such varied entities as greenbelts, earthquake contingencies, and energy technologies, among others, has much potential to contribute to the well-being of East Bay residents in years to come.

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