

Chapter 3  
THE OUTLOOK FOR OPEN SPACE IN HALF MOON BAY

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Introduction

The concept of open space has become an issue of increasing importance in the Bay Area. Accelerated growth rates and rapid development have led to concerns about the conservation of open space. We have come to realize that, like so many valuable resources, open space is an exhaustible resource.

The city of Half Moon Bay is fortunate in that nearly two-thirds of the city is currently open space. But there are ample provisions for growth and development in the city plan. Because of this, it is important to take a look at the patterns this growth is likely to take and what its implications are for open space in Half Moon Bay. Various studies have evaluated the many general aspects of planning in Half Moon Bay (e.g., J.M. Sanger, 1979). To my knowledge, no study has specifically looked at the city plan and its implications for open space. This study will consider the future of open space in Half Moon Bay. It will identify how much open space probably will be preserved, where the open space will be, and what form it will take.

Open space is valuable in many ways. In a general sense, one could say that it contributes to environmental quality and the well-being of people. Consider the many functions open space serves. It provides a habitat for wildlife, a watershed, and area for the recharge of groundwater and land for agriculture. Even more directly beneficial to people, it provides space for recreational activities and allows for the enjoyment of scenic beauty (ABAG, 1972). On a more esoteric level, one could say that open space serves to connect people with nature. Physically and psychologically, people need open space.

In 1970, the State of California passed legislation that recognized the need for conservation of open space. State law requires all cities and counties to have a general plan which must include an open space element (Section 65302). The intent of the open space element is "to insure that cities and counties recognize that open space is a limited and valuable resource which must be conserved wherever possible" (San Mateo County Planning Department, 1973, p. 1).

Half Moon Bay

Half Moon Bay is a coastal city located in the mid-coast region of San Mateo County. The city occupies a magnificent marine terrace that provides broad ocean vistas. Its coastline forms a long crescent-shaped bay, from which the city derives its name. The Santa Cruz Mountains rise sharply to the

east and separate the coastside from the more densely populated eastern half of the county. Several streams originating in the Santa Cruz Mountains drain to the west, through Half Moon Bay. Half Moon Bay's unique geography contributes to a diversity of environments ranging from riparian to beaches, cliffs and dunes to forested ridges. This diversity is one of Half Moon Bay's major attributes. Another attribute, and one that enhances the diversity, is its open space and rural character.

Until recently, growth in Half Moon Bay has been relatively slow. Inaccessibility to the city from the bayside and services inadequate to support growth are partially responsible for a slow growth rate (Leeds et al., 1978). But Half Moon Bay has the potential for growth within its city limits and has been earmarked for growth by developers for years. The city plan allows for a doubling of the city population.

Thus, there is increasing pressure for development in Half Moon Bay. The State Division of Highways has plans to build a freeway that will connect Half Moon Bay to San Francisco. The freeway, if built, would put Half Moon Bay within a half hour's drive from San Francisco. It will stimulate demand for housing and accompanying commercial development (Sierra Club, 1972). Such development is favored by those who feel development is necessary for the economic health of the city (Green, 1972).

#### Methodology

This study examined the Half Moon Bay Land Use Plan (LUP) in order to determine the provisions for open space contained within that plan. Background information was obtained from the Plan, and from various studies such as the study papers prepared by J.M. Sanger Associates (1979) and the economic study by MacDonald and Smart Associates (1976). The "Voice of the Coast" newspaper provided me with local insight. I also surveyed the city in order to observe present development and sites for future development.

#### Half Moon Bay Plan

The Half Moon Bay General Plan was written to comply with state law. The state code calls for a general plan that outlines development policies, including a description of principles and objectives (Section 65302). The Land Use Plan of Half Moon Bay's General Plan meets that requirement.

In addition, state law requires policy in specific areas. One such area is the open space element. The law defines open space as any land that is essentially unimproved. It can be land that possesses natural resources, agricultural land, recreational land, scenic land, watershed, or wildlife habitat. It should be designated as open space in the local open space element (Section 65560).

For Half Moon Bay there is no specific local open space element in the city plan. Although the components of the plan deal with agriculture, visual resources and environmentally sensitive habitats, it is not with a conservationist intent, but rather pro-development. Open Space provisions are minimal and are secondary to planning for development.

The Half Moon Bay Plan is really based on the Coastal Act. The city of Half Moon Bay is entirely within the zone governed by the Coastal Act. Therefore, the city's planning must conform to coastal policy and be approved by the Coastal Commission.

Several Coastal Act policies are central to Half Moon Bay's Plan. The most important policy mandates that "new development occur within, contiguous with, or in close proximity to developed areas that can accommodate it" in order to protect coastal resources by preventing urban sprawl (Section 30250a). Since Half Moon Bay is the only urban area from Pacifica to Santa Cruz (LUP, p. 112), an area of approximately 141 square miles, Half Moon Bay planners feel that the city is the appropriate place for new development. They claim that "Coastal Act policies would favor concentration of new development within the city as an urban area in lieu of development in substantially more rural areas to the north, east or south" (LUP, p. 115). Moreover, Half Moon Bay is able to accommodate much growth. Only a third of its 4,000 acres are presently developed.

A second area of Coastal Act policy that has greatly influenced planning is agriculture. The Coastal Act states that "the maximum amount of prime agricultural land shall be maintained in agricultural production to assure the protection of the area's agricultural economy, and conflicts shall be minimized between agricultural and urban land uses...by establishing stable boundaries separating urban and rural areas (Section 30241a), by limiting conversions of agricultural lands...to lands where the viability of existing agricultural uses is already severely limited by conflicts with urban uses or where the conversion would complete a logical and viable neighborhood and contribute to the establishment of a stable limit to urban development (Section 30241b), and by permitting the conversion of agricultural land surrounded by urban areas where the conversion of the land would be contiguous with existing developed lands" (Section 30241c).

The planners for Half Moon Bay have concluded that agriculture in the city is no longer viable. The present degree of urbanization has interfered with farm practices. Present farm operations suffer from urban impacts which include restrictions on operations such as application of pesticides and operation of farm machinery that is noisy and causes dust. The farmers also have problems with trespassing and vandalism (LUP, pp. 97-100).

Vacant lands in the city with prime soils also have no potential for agricultural use. The land parcels are too small, the land is too expensive, property taxes are too high, water supplies are inadequate and expensive, and there are the other problems of urban conflict (LUP, p. 97).

Although agriculture is no longer viable in the city, "preferred locations for both new and expanded operations are available outside the city and in other regions" (LUP, p. 98), and "present farmers have indicated a desire to sell their lands and relocate their operations to larger parcels in non-urban use" (LUP, p. 101).

Phasing agriculture out of Half Moon Bay is consistent with Coastal Act policy. Since agriculture is no longer economically viable in Half Moon Bay, and since Half Moon Bay is the only urban area in the

whole region, Half Moon Bay is the logical place to concentrate development. Concentrating development in Half Moon Bay assumes that the maximum amount of prime agricultural land in the region will stay in production. Furthermore, it would help to establish an urban/rural boundary. Half Moon Bay proposes its city limits to be the urban/rural boundary (LUP, p. 103).

The Land Use Plan includes a plan for phasing the conversion of agricultural land to urban use. The agricultural lands have been divided into two categories--Urban Reserve and Open Space Reserve. The name Open Space Reserve is a misnomer. It implies that the land is reserved for open space. It would more appropriately be called Urban Reserve II. The only difference between these two categories is timing of development. Urban Reserve lands may be developed after "a minimum of ten years or after 'substantial' build-out of the lands designated for development on the Land Use Plan Map." Open Space Reserve lands may be developed after "all developable lands within the city have been developed" (LUP, p. 105).

It is clear that in the long run no open space land will be preserved through agriculture. A third of the city land is land in agricultural production or vacant land with high quality soils. Roughly a fifth of this land is being set aside as either Urban Reserve or Open Space Reserve. That is, only a fifteenth of the city's land is being held back from development, and then only for a minimum period of time. Within ten years those lands could also be developed.

Open space is not just agricultural lands, though. Open space can also be land for natural resources, wildlife habitat and watershed; it can be scenic land or recreational land. Three components of the Land Use Plan deal with these topics: Environmentally Sensitive Habitat Areas and Water Resources, Coastal Access and Recreation, and Visual Resources. However, nothing in these sections makes any real contribution to conservation of open space.

The major sensitive habitats in Half Moon Bay are dunes and riparian land. The policy for riparian land is to establish a buffer zone extending thirty to fifty feet on both sides of the stream bed "from the limit of riparian vegetation" (LUP, p. 64). This policy creates a zone of greenbelt along all streams running through the city. Dune areas, as sensitive habitats, are "protected," but it is unclear how such lands are protected, and how much development is precluded on dune lands.

Recreational land will continue to play a minimal role in the conservation of open space. "The city lacks the financial resources to purchase land and/or development rights to provide lands for public recreation and/or open space use and cannot reasonably expect to obtain funds for such purposes" (LUP, pp. 17-18). At present there are only eighteen acres of land in recreational use (San Mateo County, 1984, p. 21). This does not include the major portion of beach in front of the entire city that is part of the State Beach system.

The Visual Resources section makes no provisions for open space. Although the open fields of the city provide views to the ocean and hills, there are no measures to maintain any open fields.

Policy is designed to minimize impacts of development on scenic views by careful siting. The language is very vague and not likely to be very effective. Typical policy in this section states that "new development along primary access routes from Highway 1 to the beach shall be sited so as to maintain and enhance the scenic quality of such routes" (LUP, p. 86).

#### Conclusion

The outlook for open space in Half Moon Bay is very poor. Although the state requires an open space plan, there is no plan for open space in Half Moon Bay. Furthermore, the pro-development stand, as demonstrated in the Land Use Plan, has been justified by applying Coastal Act policy. Half Moon Bay takes no responsibility for open space in its city. It seeks to maximize development while counting on the preservation of open space on county land. Half Moon Bay, however, has no jurisdiction over development over the whole region. Unless some agency, such as the Coastal Commission, can coordinate planning between the two jurisdictions, Half Moon Bay should preserve more of its own open space.

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