

Chapter 3  
OPEN SPACE FROM THE POINT OF VIEW  
OF FOUR CONTRA COSTA CITIES

Suzanne Marr

Introduction

The expiration of the 1973 Contra Costa County General Plan this year provides an opportunity to embody the changing needs of this rapidly growing county into a new plan. Updating of the Open Space Conservation Element of the General Plan can benefit from review and incorporation of municipal plans and policies. Different cities take different approaches to open space. This paper summarizes the policies and presents the major areas of open space in four central Contra Costa cities: Concord, Walnut Creek, Danville and San Ramon (Figure 1). These designations and policies definitely should be considered for the new draft. As this is a summary and gives a general overview, the municipal plans themselves should be consulted for more detail.

The Open Space Conservation Element specifies "open space and conservation goals and objectives of the County," "lands to be held in open space," and action which can be taken to implement the plan (Contra Costa County, 1973, p. 1). Planners and developers can look to a good General Plan for guidelines. As it is now, the Contra Costa plan is not used in this way (see Elizabeth Fishman's paper). With cooperation between the cities and the county a useful plan can be developed.

Incorporated Contra Costa cities are surrounded by two types of boundaries (Figure 2). The city limits outline the area in which the city has jurisdiction; the sphere-of-influence is the area planned as the probably ultimate physical and service area for an agency (Mansfield, 1985, personal communication). Though cities have jurisdiction only within city lines, they usually plan up to the sphere-of-influence lines. The county has the last say on the lands within the sphere and outside the city boundaries. Cities may review and comment, but cannot veto the county's decision outside of their city limits (Mansfield, 1985, personal communication).

Open space is an integral part of the character of Contra Costa County. Such land is valued by many residents for its visual, economic, recreational and ecological attributes. Wise planning is necessary if a balance of open space and development, suitable to the needs of the people, is to be reached. Changes in open space are often first observed as an alteration of the vista. Thus a modification of visually prominent lands can affect a city's appearance, and retention of an aesthetically appealing view is important. The most prominent point in the county is Mount Diablo. Development of

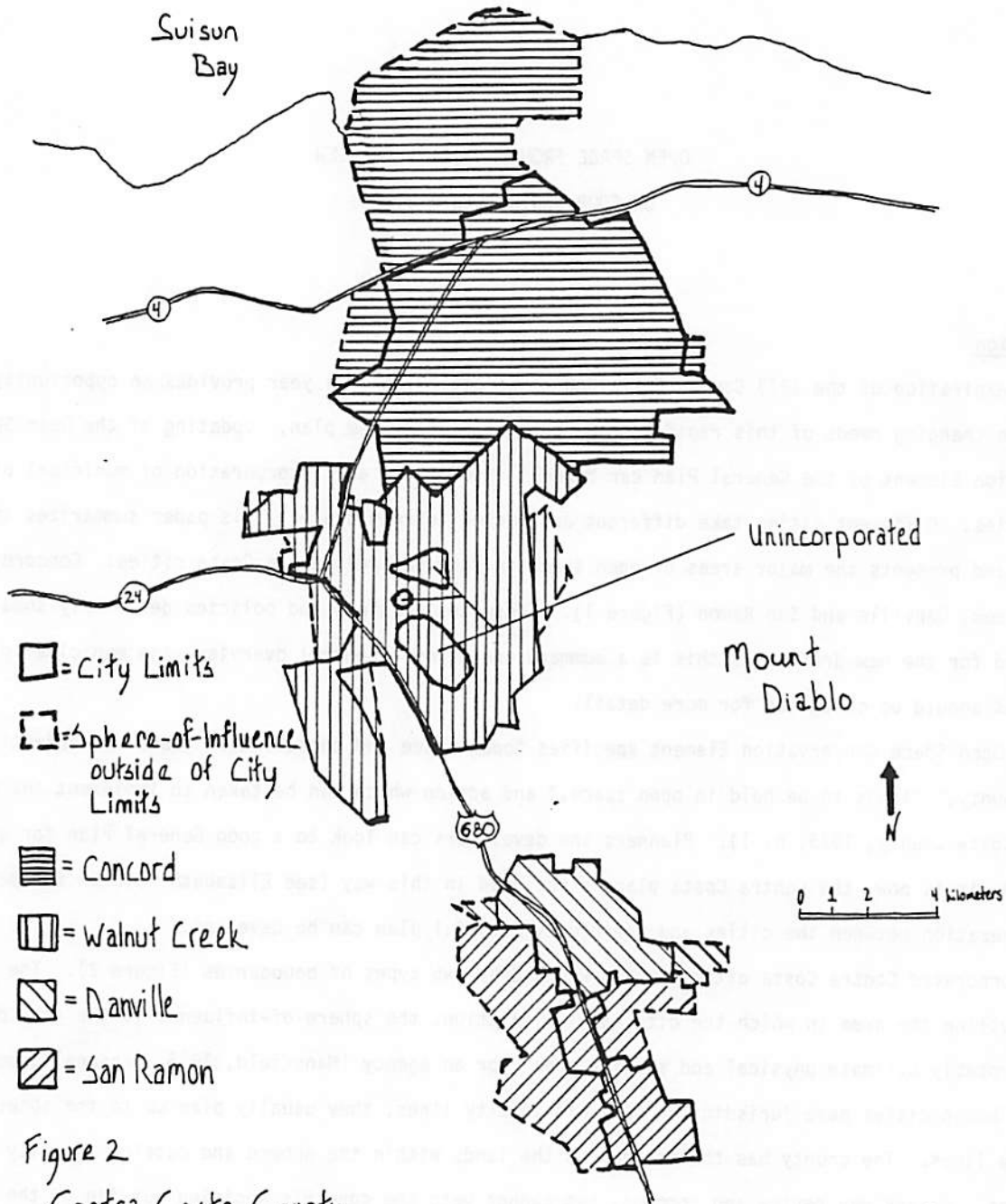


Figure 2

Contra Costa County

City Limits and Spheres - of - Influence

Source: County of Contra Costa, 1972.

its foothills would change many views.

Another aspect of open space is its use for managed production of resources (Section 65560, Government code). Some areas in and near the San Joaquin River Delta, with their rich soils, are excellently suited for farming. Prime grazing lands are extensive along the ridgelines (State of California, 1984). These regions of open space are a source of livelihood and fresh produce for many people of the county.

Recreation is another major use of undeveloped lands in the county. Access to areas where walking, jogging, biking, and horseback riding, among other activities, are not adjacent to vehicles, is important to many residents. Trail systems run through and between much of the Contra Costa open space.

There are also several ecological benefits of open space. Maintenance of environmental systems is good for public health. Vegetation can increase the water retention capabilities of soil. Thus, during a period of heavy rain, vegetated watersheds delay the occurrence and reduce the magnitude and overall amount of peak flow. In this way the probabilities of floods and mudslides are reduced. In times of drought vegetated watersheds retain a soil moisture level above that of unvegetated areas (Zinke, 1984, personal communication).

Retention of open space is necessary if the quality of life is to be maintained in Contra Costa County. The Open Space Conservation Element will be most effective if it accurately perceives the communities' need of undeveloped and developed lands. Such insight will result from accurate communication and cooperation between the cities and the county.

The first step in communication is the gathering of information. I collected data for this report from city general plans and open space elements. I utilized maps and interviews with city planners about existing open space and possible changes to supplement this information. Several people in the community provided additional information at the county level.

### Open Space Areas and Policies

#### Concord

The importance of hills in providing identity and a backdrop to the city of Concord is reflected in its General Plan. In the 1960's a hillside policy controlling development in the hills was adopted. Over the years, through bond issues and density transfers, much open space has been set aside (Gabrysiak, 1985, personal communication).

There are two categories of designated open space in Concord, Permanent Open Space and Open Space Reserve. Lands ruled unsuitable for urbanization due to their benefits or hazards are termed Permanent Open Space. The bay marshes and mudflats come under this heading (Figure 1: 1A). They host a wide variety of organisms which are an integral part of the Bay's ecosystem, and "constitute a potentially hazardous area if built upon" (City of Concord, 1973, p. 13).

Mount Diablo foothills over 600 feet high are of visual value to the city and other communities (Figure 1: 1B). These steeply sloping hills, as well as the Upper Navy Lands and Lime Ridge, have a

tendency towards slides during earthquakes (Figure 1: 1C and 1D). Thus, they qualify for permanent open space status.

The other type of designated open space in Concord is Open Space Reserve. The land is put into this category because it is generally flatter and more suited for development than is Permanent Open Space. The Northern Navy Lands, the land south of Ygnacio Valley and Pine Hollow Roads and Upper Ayers Ranch are somewhat removed from central Concord. Thus, connection with Concord services and utilities will progress slowly, if at all (Figure 1: 1E and 1F). Upper Ayers Ranch and Inner Lime Ridge are both "rural in character" (City of Concord, 1973, p. 18). The lots are large, and the density low. There is pressure for development on the ridge despite the presence of the Concord Fault on the western slope. Such pressures and a view of the city below, increase the probability of building on Lime Ridge (Figure 1: 1H).

The Navy and Inner Navy Lands are not likely to move out of government ownership soon (Figure 1: 1I). Thus, they should be considered open space at this time. Land owned by the Navy on the salt marshes is governed by the Bay Conservation and Development Commission (BCDC). Any changes in this area's character would have to be approved by the commission (City of Concord, 1973). According to the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG), 2,130 acres of Concord land have a potential for development by the year 2000 (ABAG, 1984).

#### Walnut Creek

Preservation of open space is said to be Walnut Creek's highest priority. In the new city general plan being adopted this year, this basic idea has not changed (Bob Pond, 1985, personal communication). This is shown in the city's policy to prevent building roads through open space and to cluster housing, thereby preserving open space.

Four main open space areas are discussed in the Walnut Creek General Plan: Shell Ridge, Acalanes Ridge, Sugarloaf Hill and Lime Ridge (Figure 1: 2A, 2B, 2C, and 2D). Shell Ridge is "the dominant topographic feature within the Walnut Creek vicinity" (City of Walnut Creek, 1979, p. 84). The visual quality of this site thus affects the visual quality of the city. Sugar Loaf Ridge, adjacent to Interstate 680, is used primarily for horse grazing.

Acalanes Ridge is partially within the City of Lafayette's sphere-of-influence. Both cities are interested in its future state. Similarly, Lime Ridge, used for grazing and recreation, is on both Walnut Creek and Concord lands.

ABAG estimates that 2,118 acres may be developed in Walnut Creek before the year 2000. Approximately 1,000 of that is likely to be developed by 1990 (ABAG, 1984). Rancho Pariso (200 units) and the Newhall Project (500 units) are proposed developments for portions of Lime Ridge (Goldstrom, 1985, personal communication) (Figure 1).

### Danville

Danville's basic open space philosophy is that the undeveloped ridgelines are to be preserved and for the most part dedicated to the East Bay Regional Park District (Rasmussen, 1985, personal communication). The town has a ridgeline ordinance which prohibits development in hazardous areas. Hillside Guidelines, soon to be adopted, will show methods of landscaping, suitable to visually prominent sloped areas.

Danville is situated between two major open areas: Mount Diablo State Park and Las Trampas Ridge (Figure 1: 3A). Las Trampas Regional Wilderness to the west is well-established open space, some of which is used for grazing (California Department of Conservation, 1984). It is not likely that the status of the land will change.

Within the city boundaries there are additional grazing lands, as well as some used for farming. The Sherburne Hills are to the south of Camino Tassajara (Figure 1: 3B). Short Ridge lies between Camino Tassajara and Blackhawk Road (Figure 1: 3C). Portions of these are in the process of being designated as open space by Danville. Other lands will probably be added to these areas through dedication of land in developments.

### San Ramon

San Ramon, incorporated in 1983, is in the process of developing its open space policy. One reason the city incorporated was to enable the development of adequate parks for its residents. Maximum open space is to be reserved on hillsides for visual and recreational purposes (Foucht, 1985, personal communication). Until San Ramon's general plan is completed, the city is using the county's plan, including the Open Space Conservation Element.

The open space in San Ramon west of Interstate 680 is mainly grazing land (California Department of Conservation, 1984). It is classified as Agricultural Space and Agricultural Preserve (Figure 1: 4A). East of Interstate 680, in and around the Dougherty Hills, is more Agricultural Open Space (Figure 1: 4B). It is used for farming, grazing and as a military reservation.

ABAG groups Danville and San Ramon, in addition to other areas, into the San Ramon Valley Area for its estimates of developable land. When surveys for the ABAG report were taken, neither Danville, incorporated in 1982, nor San Ramon were yet incorporated. There is a potential for development of 12,499 acres by the year 2000. ABAG projects 11,507 acres of this to be developed for residential use (ABAG, 1984). These figures also include Blackhawk and other areas east of Danville and San Ramon.

### Discussion

A common thread running through the open space policies in the four cities is the emphasis on the preservation of ridgelines. Within this theme, certain aspects are stressed by the cities. San Ramon focuses on minimal development of the hills so that they can be utilized as parks. Concord and Walnut Creek address the clustering of developments low on the slopes. Danville looks at proper

landscaping for hillside homes.

Following the cities' guidance, it is clear that the greatest care should be taken in planning for and preserving hillsides in unincorporated central Contra Costa County. This action can have a solid base in the new county Open Space Conservation Element.

Some areas are of more importance to the county community as a whole than others. Such areas may be designated as open space if acquired by a government agency before development can occur or if they are not suitable for development. Among these, some parcels, such as Shell Ridge, are highly significant for their visual effect. These require careful development planning to preserve the aesthetic quality. Areas under much pressure for growth, for example Lime Ridge, need such planning to prevent haphazard development.

The cities can put more time into studying a specific area than the county could. They work with less land and can therefore provide more attention to each parcel being planned for. Thus, the cities are probably more aware of the immediate open space conditions and needs than the county is. Cities are able to monitor more closely the effectiveness of different forms of open space acquisition and maintenance for their particular areas. Some areas like Danville and Walnut Creek encourage development of the less conspicuous section of a subdivision's property. The more prominent areas can be dedicated to use by the city or by a local homeowners association (Goldstrom, 1985, personal communication).

The county's plan gives an overall scheme to open space in Contra Costa. The county considers a large scale and long time-frame. It provides a unifying principle for the individual cities (Gabrysiak, 1985, personal communication). This, combined with the cities' ability to take a more in-depth look at their land and people, can help create an effective countywide open space policy. Thus the cities' input is necessary if a worthwhile Open Space Conservation Element is to be drafted and accepted.

### Conclusion

Open space is highly valued by many Contra Costa residents for many different reasons. Development is also important to the community. A correct balance of these two factors can be found, thus creating an optimum environment for county residents.

Though the cities do much of the implementation work with open space, the counties have ultimate jurisdiction over non-incorporated areas. Inconsistencies will almost always exist, except in areas like San Ramon, which adopt the county plan. Such discrepancies can be reduced through increased interjurisdictional communication and cooperation. Incorporation of city policies into those of the county will make the open space regulations and designations stronger. Planning policies will be more far-sighted and comprehensive. Planners and developers will be able to utilize the Open Space Element as a guideline. Thus, the county and the cities will reach a more suitable balance of development and open space and will be able to maintain the equilibrium between these two land uses.

REFERENCES CITED

- Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG), 1984. Local Development Policy Survey Update for the Central and Eastern Contra Costa County Study Area. Oakland, California, 47 pp.
- City of Concord, 1973. Open Space Element, Concord Planning Commission, Concord, California, 21 pp.
- City of Danville, 1984. General Plan Map, Danville Planning Department, Danville, California.
- City of Walnut Creek, 1979. General Plan, Walnut Creek Planning Commission, Walnut Creek, California, 140 pp.
- County of Contra Costa, 1972. City Sphere of Influence Map, Contra Costa County Public Works Department, Martinez, California.
- County of Contra Costa, 1973. Open Space Conservation Plan, Contra Costa County Planning Department, Martinez, California, 76 pp.
- Foucht, B., Associate Planner, City of San Ramon. Personal communication, February 21, 1985.
- Gabrysiak, C., Principal Planner, City of Concord. Personal communication, March 1, 1985.
- Goldstrom, H., Associate Planner, City of Walnut Creek. Personal communication, February 15, 1985.
- Mansfield, D., Executive Officer, Contra Costa County LAFCO. Personal communication, March 3, 1985.
- Pond, B., Open Space Specialist, Consultant for the City of Walnut Creek. Personal communication, March 5, 1985.
- Rasmussen, W., Planner, Town of Danville. Personal communication, February 4, 1985.
- State of California, 1984. Draft, Important Farmland Map - Contra Costa County, Department of Conservation, Division of Land Resource Protection, Sacramento, California.
- Zinke, P., Professor of Forestry, University of California, Berkeley. Lecture Series, Fall, 1984.