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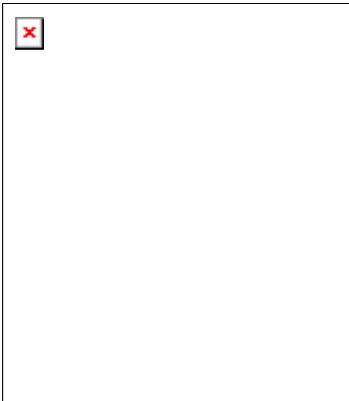
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Parchester Village Residents Fight to Preserve Breuner Marsh, Open Space

By TOMIO GERON Special to the Planet (11-12-04)



On a hill rising high above San Pablo Bay, Whitney Dotson stared out at an expanse of marshland along the eastern shore and could still see himself and his brother, Richard, as kids swimming in the grassy marsh channels in the early 1960s.

Dotson, who grew up and lives in historically African American Parchester Village nearby, is one of multiple generations of African Americans who have spent time in Breuner Marsh and now want to preserve the land.

Sharply dressed in a green shirt and small round sunglasses, the stout, 59-year-old community activist gave tours of Breuner Marsh and nearby Point Pinole on a recent Saturday at a Richmond Shoreline Festival, which included a barbecue and live band.

The festival was part of an ongoing struggle between the landowners, who want to develop the 238-acre plot of land on the North Richmond Shoreline, and festival organizers, including Parchester Village residents and environmentalists, who want to protect it as open space.

“It’s become a very important amenity,” he said. “Just having the serenity of this whole area and being removed from the larger city.”

Bay Area Wetlands LLC, the company that purchased the land in 2000, is fielding bids from developers for the site. Meanwhile, environmentalists want to protect an extremely rare undeveloped marshland along San Francisco Bay, as well as its endangered species.

“From the Sierra Club’s perspective, so much of the bay has been filled and so much of the wetlands have been lost,” said Jonna Papaefthimiou of the San Francisco Bay Sierra Club and the North Richmond Shoreline Open Space Alliance. The alliance, which organized the shoreline festival, was formed last year to preserve Breuner Marsh.

Residents of nearby Parchester Village want to protect the environment, but also want to see Breuner Marsh, which lies just across the railroad tracks from the predominantly African American community, protected for their community.

Parchester Village was developed after World War II for African Americans who moved to Richmond to work in the shipyards and could not buy houses elsewhere. It was built on the donated land of founder Fred Parr, a white developer. Local residents say that it is the first African American homeowners'™ community in the Bay Area. About 1,000 people live in 400 single-family, one-story homes on this small tract sandwiched between two railroad tracks. It has remained mostly black since it was built, though some Latino families have moved in recently.

Whitney Dotson's™ father, the late Reverend Richard Daniel Dotson, was one of the early settlers in Parchester in 1950 and became a community leader, organizing to preserve Breuner Marsh and helping to get adjacent Point Pinole turned over to the East Bay Regional Park District.

For years, Whitney Dotson remembers, he and other Parchester young people would hop the railroad tracks and trudge through the pickleweed to get to the marsh channels for swimming. During the 1970s, however, the channels were illegally filled in. But even after that, Breuner Marsh has been a de facto park for residents, said Dotson.

“Every generation of people in Parchester have found some way to use that space,” said Dotson. “There's a number of kids over the years who have gone fishing, playing, just observing the wildlife.”

Open space is rare in Richmond. Predominantly African-American Northern Richmond, which includes Parchester, has one-third as much open space per capita as Contra Costa County per capita, according to a study by the Oakland-based Pacific Institute.

“If you could see all the development along the shore that's been off limits to us,” said Henry Clark, director of the West County Toxics Coalition and a well-known activist against toxic pollution in Richmond. “We want access to Breuner Marsh and the shoreline. The land should be held as a public trust for the people.”

Meanwhile, the City of Richmond, with a \$35 million budget deficit, needs new revenue desperately. Richmond City Councilmembers, whose approval is required for any development, are waiting to see what Bay Area Wetlands does.

“Breuner Marsh is a beautiful piece of property and it really deserves to be protected,” said City Councilmember Maria Viramontes. “And it connects to a large park space at Point Pinole, it creates a unique opportunity to enlarge that park.”

Viramontes believe that there is room for a small development on an adjacent area next to Richmond Parkway. However, such a development would depend on what happens with the Breuner property.

“I think most of the [City] Council is pretty clear we want to keep it as open space,” she said.

Dotson said he is not opposed to a small restaurant or educational center near Breuner Marsh.

Newly elected first-time City Councilmember Gayle McLaughlin, who also attended the festival, believes that open space is the best use for the space. “If we develop what little open space we have left,” she said, “we're going to be in an even worse place in terms of public health.”

Contra Costa County Supervisor John Gioia has also publicly supported keeping the space open.

The land, formerly owned by the Breuner furniture company, has been the subject of battles at least since the 1970s. Gerry Breuner, the former owner, came to stay on the property for weekends or longer vacations, according to Toni Silva, who rented out a cottage on the property from Breuner from late-1980 to 1983.

“It was nice,” she said. “He had a tiny pier. We used to go fishing and catch bass and flounder.”

The quaint marsh, complete with occasional duck hunters and horses that grazed the land, was almost developed when Breuner tried to build a small private airport on the site in the 1970s. According to Silva, this grew out of Breuner's™ serious hobby: airplanes. That plan took concerted effort by Parchester residents and environmentalists to shoot down—with residents like Whitney Dotson's™ father leading the way.

After Breuner died, his family eventually sold the property in 2000 for approximately \$3 million.

The current owner, Bay Area Wetlands LLC, and its agent, San Jose-based real estate developer Stan Davis, have in recent years tried different options to sell the land. One plan to build an Edgewater Technology Park came under opposition from Parchester and environmentalists, and was scrapped.

Then Signature Properties bought a six-month option on the site and sought to build housing. But the developer could not get the City Council to re-zone the site from "Open Space-Light Industrial," to residential, so Signature dropped out as well. The City wanted revenue-generating commercial development, not residential development that would require revenue-draining services.

Environmentalists, including the Richmond Environmental Defense Fund, Golden Gate Audubon Society, Save the Bay and others, say that there are very few remaining undeveloped areas along the bay and they are intent on protecting this swath of land. The California clapper rail, a small reddish-brown bird, and the tiny salt marsh harvest mouse are two animals living in Breuner Marsh that are on the federal endangered species list.

Richmond residents also deserve the open space, Papaefthimiou of the Sierra Club said. "Most of the Richmond shoreline has been lost to Chevron or the Navy or another industrial company," she said. "Even though they have a huge shoreline, most is polluted or not accessible to the public."

The lack of open space in Richmond is an environmental justice issue and a form of racial discrimination, said Clark of the Toxics Coalition. "This is on a spiritual level—being by the water. Not having that access is an attack on the life and well-being of this community. We're likely to do whatever is necessary—even to possibly occupying the Breuner Marsh area," he said, adding that he hopes that that does not happen.

The importance Clark places on the struggle over Breuner Marsh speaks to the unusual nature of this environmental battle in Richmond—in that it is an effort to keep open space, rather than the usual one to shut down or stop some major toxic threat.

Talks about the site are now heating up again, as Bay Area Wetlands seeks to sell the property. Environmentalists and Parchester activists want the East Bay Regional Park District to purchase the land, and the agency has made an offer, said Brad Olson, its environmental program manager.

"We've offered to purchase the property," he said. "The property owner is not willing to sell at this point." The parks district owns over 95,000 acres in 65 parks, recreation areas and shorelines and is seeking to add new lands.

Bay Area Wetlands wants to get higher than the market value for the property, and the park district can only purchase it at the currently appraised price, said Olson.

Olson would not comment on how much the parks district bid.

Don Carr, a resident of Napa and one of the owners of the property, would not comment on discussions with potential buyers. "We haven't solidified plans yet," he said.

Carr dismissed the concerns of residents and activists who want to keep the land from being developed. "You know when UC Berkeley was built there were people lobbying at that time not to build it," he said. "There's always people saying things. That's not news. In fact there were a lot of people who didn't want the Bay Bridge."

Stan Davis of Bay Area Wetlands would not comment.

According to Olson, Bay Area Wetlands is weighing at least one other private company's offer and also has been waiting to see what happens with another major Richmond shoreline development at Point Molate.

On Tuesday, Richmond approved selling that property to Upstream Point Molate LLC to build a casino and resort. Even with City Council approval, the outcome of that development is far from clear, with numerous other state and federal approvals needed. But with that deal now approved, and a value now placed on that shoreline property to compare to the Breuner site, a Breuner sale could move forward.

Olson, for his part, says that if the EBRPD were to acquire the property, the site would remain open space. He thinks the chances of any major development on the site are "pretty slim."

"If the [new] proposal is anything like the other concepts—either a large commercial or housing development—there's going to be a lot of opposition from the local community and environmental community," he said.

However, the City Council's approval of the Point Molate casino indicate that development on Richmond open land such as Breuner Marsh is definitely possible—especially if it brings jobs. Activists against development do have two points going for them that Point Molate did not—first, the Breuner property, is close to residential areas such as Parchester, and secondly, the Breuner site has a history of development deals being shot down by community pressure.

Meanwhile, Whitney Dotson hopes Breuner Marsh will be available to his grandchildren and other nearby residents. He imagines them having similar trips out to the marsh, like the ones he had with his brother and friends, enjoying the wildlife and forgetting,

for a few minutes, the imposing city nearby.

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