



East Bay Regional Park District

90 Years of Big Parks

From sunlit shores to magnificent ridge-tops, the East Bay Regional Park District spans 126,000 acres in Alameda and Contra Costa Counties, offering experiences as diverse as the land itself. With 73 parks, over 1,330 miles of trails, campgrounds, visitor centers, historic sites, lakes and shorelines the District's mission is to provide recreational opportunities, ensure the natural beauty and cultural history of the land, and protect wildlife habitat.

This story is an inspirational one in which citizens during the toughest of economic times in the 1930s created the EBRPD, the first regional park district in the nation. In

the late 1920s thousands of acres of surplus watershed land **became** available for development. Far-sighted civic leaders sought to preserve this land and retain a balance of recreation and wilderness features, ideas unheard of at the time. In 1934, members of a grass-roots land preservation movement placed a measure on the ballot which passed by a resounding 71%, during the depths of the Great Depression. The vote created the East Bay Regional Park District. On the same ballot, voters elected the first Board of Directors: who included Major Charles Lee Tilden, August Vollmer, Leroy Goodrich, Thomas Roberts and Dr. Aurelia Henry Reinhardt.

Formative Years: Four parks (1934-1945)

At the outset, the District included only seven Alameda County communities and no parks. By 1936, it was able to purchase enough land to create three parks: Upper Wildcat Canyon (renamed “Tilden” as a 79th birthday surprise), Roundtop (now Sibley Volcanic Regional Preserve) and Lake Temescal, home of one of the East Bay’s first reservoirs. The first three parks were opened with great fanfare on October 18, 1936. They were soon followed by Redwood Regional Park in 1939. In the 1940s, the start of World War II halted Park District growth and much of Tilden Regional Park was turned over the U.S. Army Defense Command.

After the War: Seven Cities and Eight Parks (1946-1961)

At the end of the war, under the leadership of general manager Richard Walpole, the District began to grow as people returned to the parks seeking family recreation. Concessions such as Tilden's steam train, carousel and pony ride were added. This growth continued into the 1950s with Roberts Regional Park's swimming pool, baseball field, picnic areas and trails. The District opened its sixth park, Grass Valley (Anthony Chabot) and Little Farm was added to Tilden. The post-war era created a population shift as residents moved to the suburbs. Southern Alameda County was annexed in 1956, and recreation areas Don Castro and Cull Canyon opened.



Briones Regional Wilderness looking toward Mount Diablo

Contra Costa County joins the District; 32 new parks (1962 to 1987)

In the 1960s, William Penn Mott, Jr. became general manager as the East Bay's population exploded. He, Park District Directors and staff leaders Richard Trudeau and Hulet Hornbek shared an enthusiastic vision of a grand system of hilltop and shoreline parks and regional trails in the entire East Bay. In 1964, most of Contra Costa County was annexed to the District. Some new parks included Sunol, Lake Chabot, Briones, Las Trampas,

Crown Beach and Coyote Hills, showing the diversity of the expanding park district.

Trudeau became general manager in 1968. The District faced the challenges of rising land costs and evolving recreational demands from the public. Then Proposition 13 and the California taxpayers' revolt of 1978 restricted funds for agencies dependent on the property tax. Future funding for land acquisition and development were limited.



Iron Horse Regional Trail.

There was a major transformation in public involvement during these two decades by residents, open space advocates, and organized environmentalists who looked to the District to protect the Bay shoreline, preserve

historic sites, provide environmental education. Industrial and filled lands along the shoreline were acquired and rehabilitated – a new idea. Trail use grew rapidly with an increase in walking, hiking, jogging, and mountain biking as the “exercise-for-health” generation became active park users.

Coming of Age: 73 total parks (1988 to 2024)

In 1988, District voters approved the passage of Measure AA, a \$225 million bond to provide funding for both regional and local park acquisition and projects. Pat O’Brien became general manager that year. With these new funds, the District added 15 new regional parks and an additional 34,000 acres of open space. This was also the time for expanding park and recreation services for the public, incorporating volunteer programs, and offering a subsidized bus program for seniors and low income and disabled residents.

The District built and opened Camp Arroyo, a state-of-the-art environmental education and youth camp in Livermore near Lake Del Valle. Some of the other parks opened during these decades were Brushy Peak, Round Valley, Sycamore Valley, Eastshore, Bay Point, Pleasanton Ridge, Big Break on the Delta and Dumbarton Campground. The first part of the Thurgood Marshall

Regional Park (formerly part of the Concord Naval Weapons Station) is scheduled to open in 2025. The Iron Horse Regional Trail began in the eighties and became a recreational and commuter parkway through Contra Costa, recognized as a Millennial Trail in 2000..



Camp site at Round Valley Regional Preserve,
photographer Kevin Fox

The Park District will always remain a work in progress as it works to acquire and operate regional parks and trails to serve the population. Bob Doyle's leadership first in land acquisition and then as General Manager (2010 to 2020) was pivotal for the parks. The District has relied heavily on funds from VVW to purchase targeted open space, a \$500 million bond measure extension approved by voters at the end of 2008, Regardless of future

challenges and opportunities, the East Bay Regional Park District is committed to providing East Bay residents with recreation opportunities and open space preserves close to home.

Written by Ned MacKay, edited by Beverly Lane. See the EBRPD website at ebparks.org for more information.

From August 31 to September 15, 2024 the MuseumSRV will host an EBRPD 90th pop-up celebration exhibit with some special displays on the Iron Horse Regional Trail.