

The People's Park in the Ross Valley

by Ann Thomas
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If citizen action ever created a park, it was in 1973 when neighbors in Kentfield Gardens rallied to stop development in a little noticed and degraded saltwater marsh along Bon Air Road that would find new life as Hal Brown Park at Creekside. The area had already been mostly filled with dredged materials.

Rumors about development in the former marsh across Bon Air Road from the hospital came to a head at a community meeting in November 1972, at which a developer described plans to build up to 320 condominiums on the property. It would be a densely packed complex of units to be sold for about \$60,000 each, a princely sum at the time. The project would have required an estimated 200,000 cubic yards of fill to elevate the site and build a possible road extension from Wolfe Grade through what is now the Bacich School parking lot, to access the development and Bon Air Road.

"His announcement came like a bomb shell," Berens Drive resident Ruth Solomon wrote to a friend after the meeting. She described how residents had reacted to the plan, that "for most of them their memory of the area was that of a pleasant marsh with all kinds of birds, migrating and otherwise...there would be great bitterness about the destruction of a beautiful environment."

The property, owned by the Roman Catholic Welfare Corporation of San Francisco, was once part of a large saltwater marsh extending from Corte Madera Creek to Sir Francis Drake Blvd. A 1955 bond issue generated funds to build Bacich, then called Wolfe Grade School, on raised fill on a portion of the former marsh. The Army Corps of Engineers in the late 1960s used the area along Bon Air Road to dump dredge



In this 1960s photo looking northwest, the newly-created multiuse path separates Hal Brown Park at Creekside from realigned Corte Madera Creek. Photo courtesy of Richard Torney

spoils from the Corte Madera Creek channel, removing nearly all of its habitat.

Despite the site's neglected and sad appearance, neighbors were alarmed about the threat of losing the once thriving marsh and wildlife haven. This fear was heightened by concerns that the development would also exacerbate flooding which routinely impacted area properties during heavy rains and high tides, as well as the prospect of losing a fondly regarded educational resource. "The marsh area," Mrs. Solomon wrote, "has been used by the students of Wolfe Grade School, Kent School and the College of Marin as a part of the study of the ecology of the area, as an example of both a healthy marsh and a

disturbed one."

The Committee for a Creekside Park was quickly formed to oppose the proposal for housing. Meetings with the developer were unsuccessful, and they were unable to dent the County's approval of the project. Undeterred, they pooled their professional expertise to form County Service Area (CSA) 17, a special district option permitted under California state law to enable small areas to provide limited special services.

CSA 17 was established in August 1973 as a funding mechanism to raise funds to purchase the Bon Air marsh property. The special district encompasses neighborhoods surrounding the park and marsh, in all about 2,470 acres comprising a small portion of Larkspur as well as areas in unincorporated Kentfield.

To assess community support for their ambition, the Committee for a Creekside Park surveyed neighbors door-to-door. The survey asked residents if they knew that the Marin County Planning Commission had approved a 260-unit condominium development on the property, if they would prefer recreational and ecological use of the land, and if they would support this with a tax of up to one dollar per month to purchase the property. The response was overwhelming: 93% favored a park, 78% agreed to pay for it. Subsequently, two measures were placed on the November 1973 ballot for voters of CSA 17: an \$850,000 bond issue for acquisition and development of the proposed park, and a maintenance tax for the park's ongoing upkeep. To build support, the Committee secured a conceptual plan from local residents Lawrence Halprin and Harold and Becky Watkins, envisioning a revitalized salt marsh, upland native vegetation, and a playground. It was shared with residents at meetings prior to the election.

Both measures were passed by more than 90% of votes in the district election, and the dream was taking shape. After lengthy negotiations the property owners agreed to sell the site to the community rather than the developer, property title was transferred to the County, and the County partnered with the neighborhood committee to create the park.

The landscape firm of Royston, Hanamoto, Beck & Abey was selected to create a site master plan, which still remains the basis for the park's layout. Dredge spoils, which had destroyed part of the marsh, were moved, and restoration was delayed for two years for winter rains to leach out the salts that had come from the creek. The plan's summary proposed restoration of 16 acres in their existing state, ten acres to be restored to marsh. The marsh was planned as "a well-formed natural expanse of groundcover composed of a rich variety of marsh plants interlaced with waterways, with a large island as sanctuary for birds and animals." The park was to be developed on the six-acre landfill across from the hospital grounds. Firm planners observed numerous birds and other wildlife on the property, providing a list of 67 birds, 15 mammals, and 13 reptiles and amphibians that they anticipated "could possibly be observed after completion of the park."

There were a number of set-backs. In 1976, development of the park was stalled by the 1975/76 drought and the community even attempted to find water by drilling a well; it was not a success. Finally, in 1979, with help from some State Parks funding, irrigation was installed, turf planted, and the play structures, picnic area, and a path to Bacich School was finally accomplished. Barbara Boxer, then serving as the district's County Supervisor, wrote to her colleagues: "The successful reestablishment of a salt marsh in an area previously inundated with dredging spoils reflects the basic philosophy of the neighborhood...willing to pay for unique park and environmental improvements out of their own pockets and make these areas readily available to all of the people in the county."

The park was renamed in 2010 as Hal Brown Park at Creekside, after the popular County Supervisor who had helped spearhead funding for a \$1.6 million renovation, completed in 2011. That renovation included a large modern playground with a climbing wall, sand and play areas, and swings, an expanded picnic area, habitat restoration, realigned pathways, a health and meditation grove, and a marsh overlook. A project is currently underway to replace an aging pedestrian/bicycle bridge and pathway connecting the frontage path along Bon Air Road and the creek's multiuse path. The existing path is underwater at high tides and interferes with proper drainage of nearby areas.

Marin County Parks, with CSA 17 funding, continues to maintain the park as well as the multiuse pathway along the creek. The Kentfield Planning Advisory Board, comprised of volunteers appointed by the Board of Supervisors, serves as the community advisory board for the CSA.

Marin County Parks has a longstanding partnership with Friends of Corte Madera Creek Watershed and they have partnered on a number of projects at the park over the years. These have included: southeastern Creekside Marsh culvert replacement and habitat enhancement, that replaced the older failing culvert with three larger culverts to increase tidal circulation in the marsh; upland habitat enhancement, removal of invasive plants and their replacement by native plants; ongoing workdays; the removal of old construction fill and dredge spoils, and their replacement by soil suitable for a marsh, and the planting of native vegetation such as pickleweed and saltgrass.

For more than sixteen years, Friends has worked with the California Coastal Conservancy's bay-wide Invasive *Spartina* Project which seeks to entirely rid the Bay of invasive cordgrasses. Two of the invasive cordgrasses were introduced, probably accidentally, when the marsh was restored at Hal Brown Park at Creekside. It became one of the major infestations of these aggressive invader plants which crowd out native

vegetation and exacerbate flooding in adjacent land areas. This project will hopefully be completed in the near future.

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