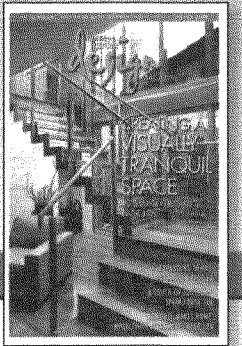


LARRY ELLISON wins 60 percent cut in property taxes on his Woodside estate. Page 5

**New Home & Garden
Design Magazine**

**Inside
this
issue**



The Almanac

THE HOMETOWN NEWSPAPER FOR MENLO PARK, AThERTON,

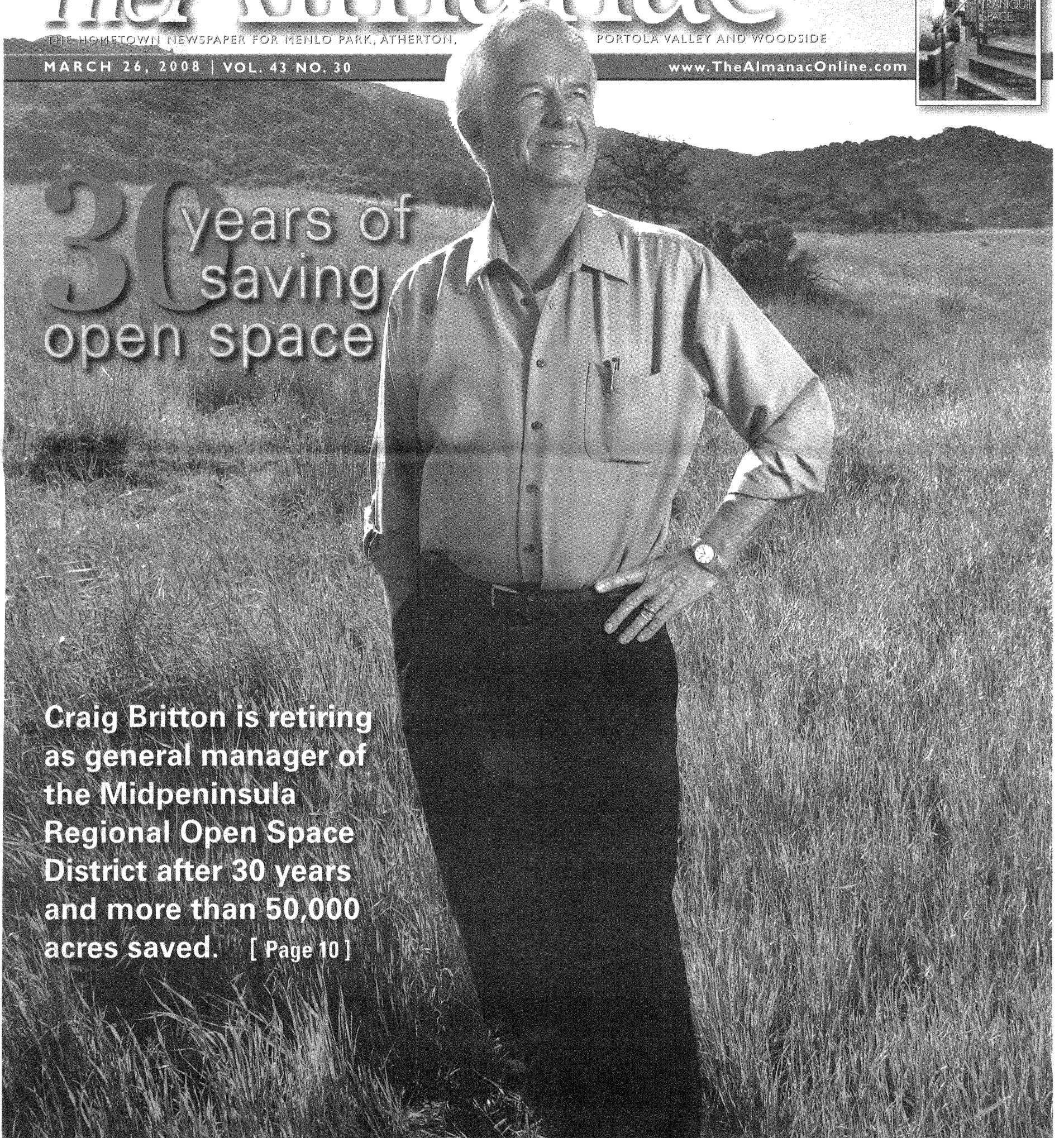
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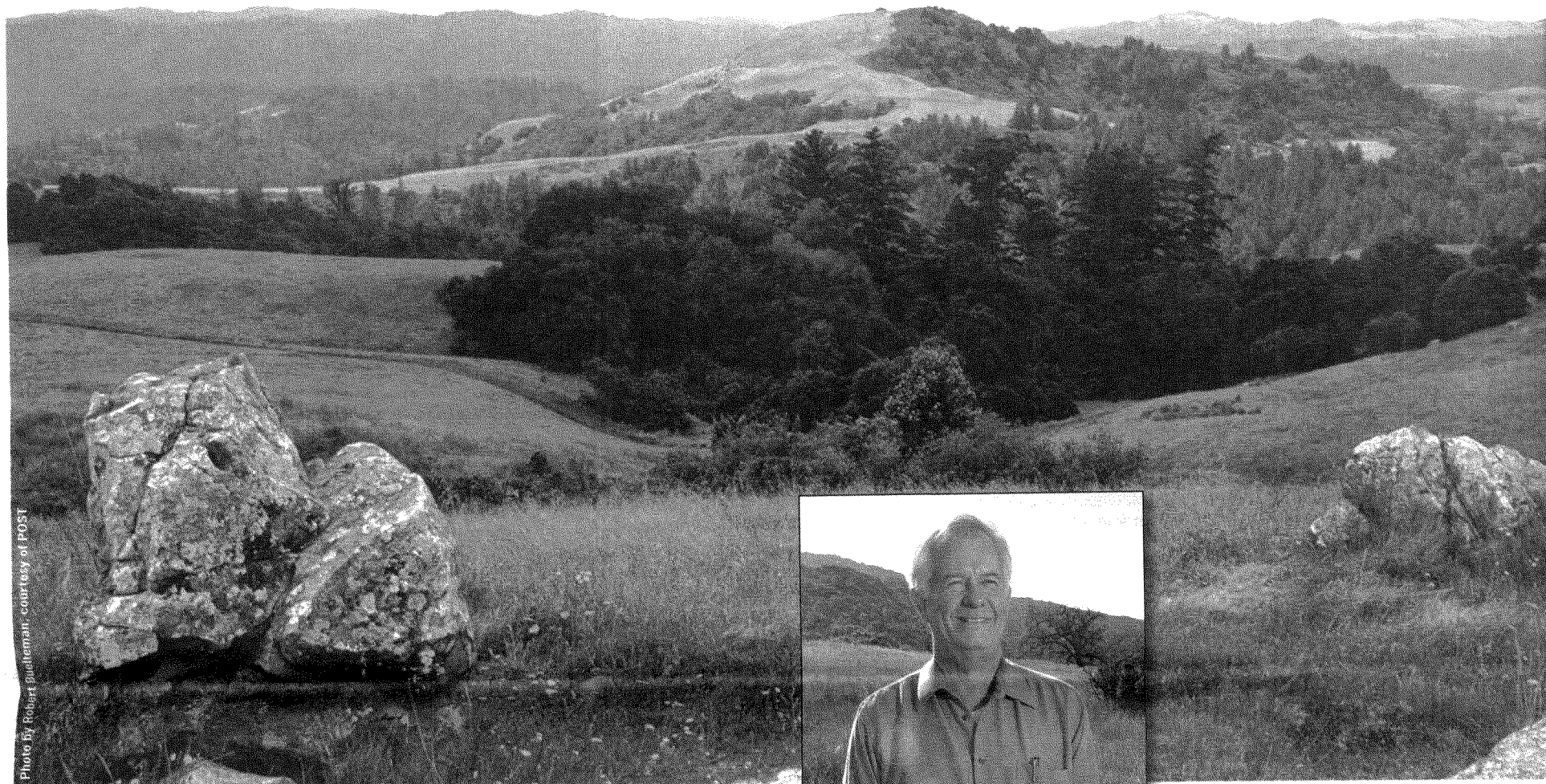
30 years of
saving
open space

**Craig Britton is retiring
as general manager of
the Midpeninsula
Regional Open Space
District after 30 years
and more than 50,000
acres saved. [Page 10]**



Peninsula
open space

36 years and co



By Marion Softky
Almanac Staff Writer

Craig Britton's
legacy is almost
60,000 acres of
open space in the
Peninsula's foothills,
mountains, Bayfront
and Coastsides

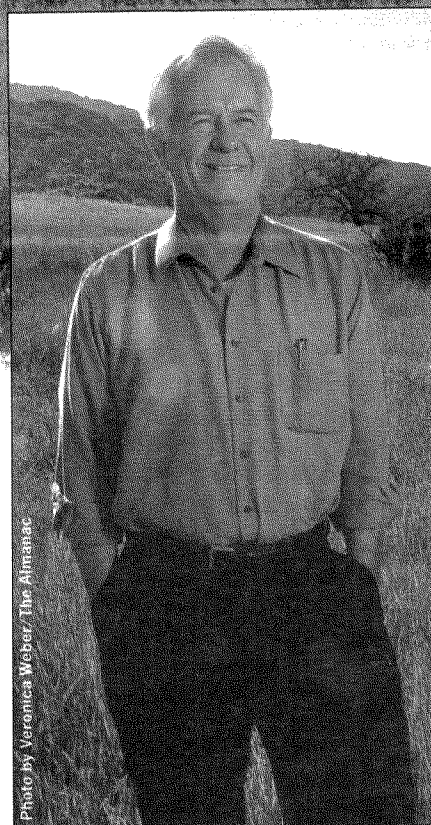
When Craig Britton came to the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District as land acquisition manager in 1977, it owned approximately 6,000 acres of land in the hills of Santa Clara County. As he retires 30 years later as general manager, the pioneering agency expects to top 60,000 acres of open space preserved on the Peninsula by the end of 2008.

As a result, the oasis of open lands in the hills, mountains and Coastsides of the San Francisco Peninsula is almost unique for major metropolitan areas around the world. Windy Hill, Edgewood Park, Purisima Canyon, and much of Skyline ridge are now preserved and open to the public because of Mr. Britton's negotiating skills.

"Craig's legacy is the greenbelt above Silicon Valley," says Mary Davey, one of the founders of the district and a current member of its board. "It's the truth. It was his ability to find ways to buy the most land for the least amount of money."

The saga of the open space district — aided for 30 years by Mr. Britton — and its sister agency, the Peninsula Open Space Trust (POST), is the story of how the San Francisco Peninsula did not follow the development path of Daly City or Los Angeles: subdivisions, threaded by freeways and expressways, sprawling over hills and valleys to the beaches and bluffs of the Pacific.

In the 1960s, environmental groups, such as the Sierra Club and the new Committee for Green Foothills, supported by



the eloquent voice of the late author Wallace Stegner, began fighting the seemingly inevitable spread of developments. They fought subdivision by subdivision; they won some, lost some.

Increasingly they realized, as Mr. Britton says, "Once a piece of property is developed, it's never open space again."

At that time, Skyline ridge was almost entirely in private ownership. I can remember, personally, looking at the green hills and wondering where I could take the kids for a picnic. The answer was Huddart Park. Almost everything else was privately owned — and subject to the wishes and intentions of its owner.

Around 1970, a group of environmentalists centered in Palo Alto began looking for a way to avoid the constant battles over development: buy the land — or "fee

simple," as Wallace Stegner said. They planned a government agency, similar to the East Bay Regional Park District, that could levy taxes, buy land, and manage it for open space and public recreation.

In 1972, voters in northern Santa Clara County formed what is now the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District. In 1976, voters in San Mateo County, from San Carlos south, voted to join the district.

In 1977, Mr. Britton joined the district as land acquisition manager. He became assistant general manager to general manager Herb Grench in 1979; and then in 1994, Mr. Britton became general manager.

"Some very forward-thinking people started the district," Mr. Britton says in a farewell interview.

Audrey Rust, president of POST, adds, "Craig built on a vision to make the district grow beyond the dreams of its founders."

Early days

Mr. Britton came aboard during one of the district's noisiest controversies. It was purchasing 750 acres off Page Mill Road that was occupied by a large commune called The Land. The property is now part of the Monte Bello Open Space Preserve.

A substantial chunk of his first seven years was occupied by demolishing numerous buildings and platforms built by members of The Land, and in dispersing close to 100 commune members — who fought on for years. Some are still telling their stories online at theland.wikispaces.com.

District's next general manager brings new skills to open space position

By Marion Softky

Almanac Staff Writer

The Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District will enter a new era April 14, when Stephen Abbors takes over as its third general manager.

Mr. Abbors, a trained biologist who has managed 28,000 acres of watershed lands for the East Bay Municipal Utility District, will increasingly focus on managing the nearly 56,000 acres the open space district already owns, as well as acquiring new land for open space.

"I'm very excited," says Mr. Abbors, winding up his job in Oakland. "My task is to clearly understand the vision of the board, the public and staff. I'll take a different look at programs. I want to get in touch with community and use groups, and get to know their issues."

"It's going to be a very, very steep learning curve."

Retiring General Manager Craig Britton welcomes his replacement. "I came out of real estate and land purchase; Steve's background is biology and resource management," he says. "In reality, resource management is more important."

Mr. Abbors' experience fits well with his new job. He's worked on the "full gamut" in the East Bay, he says, including land acquisition, grazing, trails, water quality, endangered species, recreation, and fire control.

Mr. Abbors, an enthusiastic gardener whose wife comes from an old farm family, particularly looks forward to working with the farming community on the coast to promote farming and grazing on district lands. "The mission of the district and the mission of the farming community are mutually supportive," he says.

The district's next big purchase of the historic Mindego Ranch, just west of Skyline and north of Page Mill Road, will give Mr. Abbors a chance to transfer his skills.

The district is in the process of buying the 1,047-acre ranch — highlighted by landmark Mindego Hill — from the Peninsula Open Space Trust. Former owner Chris True will be moving his cattle herd — including his rodeo Brahma bulls — to Idaho in the fall; the district will be working with neighbors to prepare a plan for future uses and recreation on the signature property.

Mr. Abbors is in the process of moving his family from Walnut Creek to Los Gatos. "It's very important to wake up each morning to local news," he says.

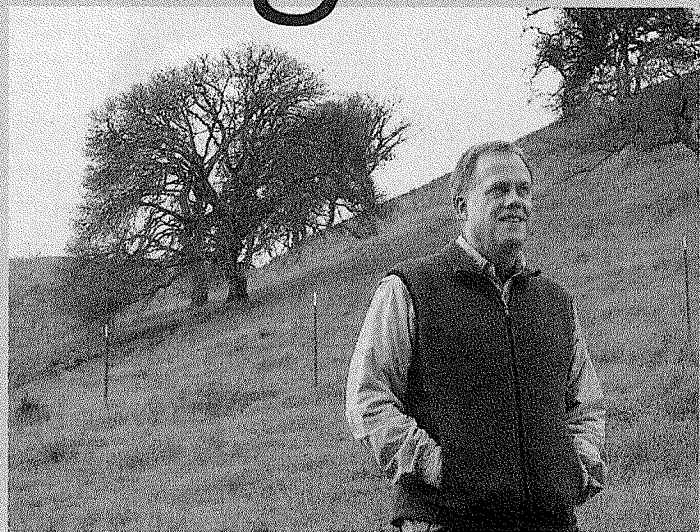
An avid hiker, Mr. Abbors expects to develop a hands-on, feet-on relationship with the district. "I hiked 1,300 miles last year," he says. "I love to be out in nature."

Mr. Britton will continue consulting for the new general manager on specific projects. Eventually, he and his wife Carlene plan to move to Port Townsend, Washington, where they have bought an 1871 Victorian house to fix up. "The nearest freeway is 30 miles away," he says. "It's an opportunity to get involved with a small community."

Mr. Britton admits what he would like to do if he were still general manager. "I would like to shoot for 100,000 acres," he says. "But to accomplish that, the district would have to do a funding measure. We've never done that in 35 years."

Asked for his advice to his successor, Mr. Britton says, "Listen to your heart, and get out on the land enough to renew your spirit."

Mr. Abbors gives high praise to Mr. Britton. "What a legacy Craig has left!" he says. "I look forward to continuing that legacy." ■



Courtesy of Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District

Mindego Ranch, topped by landmark Mindego Hill, is in the process of being purchased from POST by the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District. Key players in acquiring the 1,047-acre cattle ranch and planning its future are retiring General Manager Craig Britton, left, and incoming General Manager Stephen Abbors, above.

"That consumed a lot of time," Mr. Britton comments.

Also in 1977, the district initiated the formation of POST, a private, nonprofit land trust that could raise private money, purchase and manage land, and operate with a lot more privacy and flexibility than a government agency.

The landmark Windy Hill, rising above Portola Valley and long a target for development, was the first big success of the long-running partnership between the open space district and POST. Bob Augsburger, POST's first executive director, negotiated the gift by Hare, Brewer & Kelley of 537 acres to POST, Mr. Britton reports. In 1981, POST sold it to MROSD for \$1.7 million, half of what it was worth. That money allowed POST to buy more land.

"That put us on the map," says Mr. Britton.

Another early success was the purchase in 1978 of 386-acre Long Ridge Ranch, west of Skyline and south of Page Mill Road. With Pulitzer Prize-winning author Wallace Stegner as one of the owners, the district bought it for \$500,000, or 50 percent of market value.

"What a bargain! At today's prices that's like free," Mr. Britton says. "Looking out over Butano Ridge and the Pacific Ocean, it doesn't get any more beautiful!"

Harry Turner of Ladera, one of the first district directors from San Mateo County, praises Mr. Britton for his creative ways of negotiating and assembling financial pack-

ages — combining grants with resources from POST and district funds — to make purchases possible.

"Craig was a lynchpin; he was creative and persistent," Mr. Turner says. "He found highly efficient ways to use public resources."

Mr. Britton came to the district with real estate skills honed by years of service as a right-of-way agent for Caltrans. "I was essentially purchasing land for free-ways," he says.

Born in Winfield, Kansas, Craig grew up in San Francisco, and earned a degree in business administration from San Francisco State University.

In the late 1960s, Mr. Britton encountered the burgeoning environmental movement. When he was still at Caltrans, he got to write an analysis of a proposed freeway over Highway 17 to Santa Cruz.

"What made Santa Cruz special was not being able to commute over the hill," he says with hindsight. "If we built a full freeway, I thought it would ruin Santa Cruz County. It would become a bedroom community."

Mr. Britton recommended against a freeway; he suggested a monorail instead. And he took a job with Santa Cruz County.

In Santa Cruz County, Mr. Britton broadened his real estate experience by purchasing land, not just for highways, but for libraries, parks and sewer lines. He bought and restored a Victorian house within walking distance of the beach.

After a short stint with the Marin County Open Space District, Mr. Britton accepted

a job with MROSD while on vacation in Amsterdam. "I didn't like Marin that much," he says.

Now he lives in Los Altos, less than a mile from his office, with his second wife, Carlene Bruins. They married in 1992 when she was in charge of community programs at the district. Now she's in charge of Web content for Foothill College.

Thirty years after Mr. Britton joined the district, the joint accomplishments are impressive. The district newsletter gives some more numbers:

■ Eight open space preserves have grown to 26.

■ The staff has increased from 13 employees to just over 100.

Mr. Britton often jokes that when he joined the district in 1977, it had 6,000 acres and \$12 million in the bank; now it owns almost 56,000 acres and is \$130.2 million in debt. He says, "They aren't making any more land, but they print money every day."

Highlights/controversies

Relaxed in his office, Mr. Britton reviews the successes, challenges and controversies surrounding his 30 years of preserving and managing open space for the district.

An early setback was the passage in 1978 of Proposition 13, which cut property taxes to cities, schools and other tax-supported agencies.

"All of a sudden the rug was pulled out from under us," Mr. Britton recalls. The eventual upshot has been a reduction in property

tax revenue of about 30 percent, he says.

Mr. Britton takes pride in his role in negotiating the preservation of two major properties in San Mateo County: Edgewood County Park and Natural Preserve, formerly a surplus state college site bordering Redwood City; and the Pulgas Ridge Open Space Preserve, once the Hassler Health Home, San Francisco's abandoned tuberculosis sanitarium in the San Carlos hills.

While spring wildflowers are now attracting visitors to both the Edgewood and Pulgas preserves, the negotiations leading to their acquisition were long, complex, and contentious. Edgewood was acquired in 1980 with a federal grant; Pulgas, in 1983 after a lawsuit.

"The city and county of San Francisco was the hardest to deal with as a landowner," Mr. Britton still sighs.

The biggest controversies focused on The List, the nuns, and, more recently, the district's annexation of the entire Coastsides.

When the district was forced by state law to publish a list of all properties it might negotiate with in closed session, it released a single list of all 600 properties in the acquisition area.

The resulting uproar stirred the fears of Skyline property owners already suspicious of a government agency that was buying property and opening it to the public — and had the power to take property by eminent domain.

Continued on next page