

The hometown
newspaper for
Atherton,
Portola Valley,
Woodside and
Menlo Park.

INSIDE: Home & Garden Design

The Almanac

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EARTH DAY
2002
April 22nd

Celebrating the Bay...problems & promise

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Craig Breon works
to restore the Bay

News This Week

■ Playing fields

Anonymous Woodside
resident ready to donate
six acres to the town
for playing fields.

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■ Cat fight

Town Council passes
new rules to control felines.
A resident threatens a
battle at the ballot box.

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■ Family Almanac

Hillview students build
models of famous religious
structures as part of their
study of Islam and
Jewish religions:

EARTH DAY
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Celebrating the Bay...

problem

Photo courtesy of Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society
Harbor seals haul out on Greco Island on the Menlo Park Bayfront.



Photo courtesy of Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society

Endangered **clapper rail** may leave the endangered species list if South Bay marshes are restored. →



Black-r
feeds in

→ Two **American avocets**, in breeding plumage with orange heads and blue legs, rest in the salt marsh at the Palo Alto Baylands. Since these and many other wading birds frequent the salt ponds that ring the Bay, Craig Breon hopes that some salt ponds will remain as part of the restoration of thousands of acres of marsh in the South Bay.

Photo by Paolo Vescia



Photo by Paolo Vescia
Song sparrow sings in Palo Alto Baylands. →



Photo courtesy of Santa Clara Valley
Salt marsh **harvest mouse** is the mammal that lives on salt water.

BY MARION SOFTKY
ALMANAC STAFF WRITER

PHOTOS BY:
PAOLO VESCIA &
MARION SOFTKY

Many ways to celebrate earth, Bay

Following are local events celebrating Earth Day. For more information, check BayAreaEarthDay.net.

■ **Flood Park.** Earth Day environmental awareness fair, Saturday, April 20, 11 a.m.-3 p.m., Flood Park, 215 Bay Road, Menlo Park. Sponsors: San Mateo County, BFI. Activities: informational booths, environmental leaders. Learn about solar energy, native plants, composting, conservation. Park entrance fee waived for the day.
■ **Hidden Villa.** Exhibits, tours of two earth-friendly, sustainable buildings, farm

animal visits, wool spinning, blacksmithing. Saturday, April 20, 10 a.m.-2 p.m. Tickets, at \$10, \$35 for family of four, go on sale at 9 a.m. Carpooling encouraged. Call 949-8653, or visit hiddenvilla.org. Location: 26870 Moody Road, Los Altos Hills.
■ **Earth Day walk** leaves Shoreline Park in Mountain View April 18, ends at San Francisco Civic Center April 22. Baylands advocate Florence LaRiviere

speaks at kickoff rally, 9-10 a.m., at Shoreline Park Boathouse, Mountain View. Walk starts at 10 a.m. Participants can join for an hour, a day, or all five days. Walk is along sections of the Bay Trail. Learn about plants, animals, marshland restoration, recreational opportunities, and issues affecting Bay. Tours, rallies, festive dinners. Highlights: Bair Island

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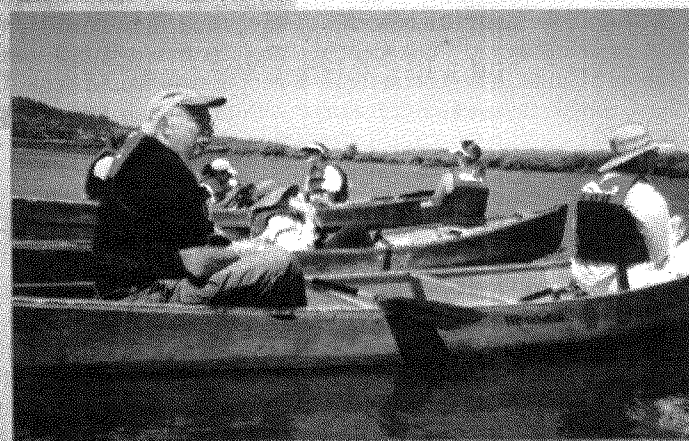


Photo by Marion Softky

Local residents enjoy a picnic on a mud bank of Bair Island. They are participating in "Canoes in Sloughs," an educational program of Save the Bay that gives school children and others a water-level view of remaining sloughs and marshes of San Francisco Bay.

ns & promise

Love the Bay? Thank Mel Lane

Among the thousands of people who deserve credit for restoring San Francisco Bay from the shrinking cesspool and garbage dump it was 40 years ago, none ranks higher than Mel Lane of Atherton.

Mr. Lane, now retired as an owner and publisher of Sunset Magazine and Books, was the first chairman of a pioneering new Bay Conservation and Development Commission (BCDC). The commission was established by state law in 1965 to balance conflicting interests in development and conservation that were openly warring over plans to fill huge tracts, such as the Berkeley Marina.

For seven years, Mr. Lane successfully guided 27 fractious people, with vastly different interests, in establishing a plan to preserve the Bay, and to make orderly decisions about what could be done both in the Bay and along its shores.

The commission, which bills itself as "the nation's first coastal management agency," has succeeded in halting wholesale filling, and has made progress in restoring and enhancing the Bay.

"We've come a long way," says Mr. Lane. "I'm optimistic."

In the early 1960s, the challenges were formidable. The Bay had already lost a third of its surface area, and three-fourths of the remaining water – much in the South Bay – was shallow enough to be easily filled.

San Mateo County's Master Plan for 1961 gives a snapshot of the official position on what could be done in the Bay. Marshlands along the Bayfront could be developed as far out as a new Bayfront Freeway, running east of Bayshore as much as 2 1/2 miles offshore. The freeway would run on the Bay side of the San Francisco Airport, Coyote Point and Bayfront Park (at that time, the Marsh Road dump).

A fill across the Bay near the Dumbarton Bridge would control tides in the South Bay and permit more intense development on the shore. A new freeway, rail, and rapid transit lines would cross it.

In Mr. Lane's seven years, the commission changed those expectations. With a temporary moratorium on projects involving Bay fill, and with Mr. Lane's steady hand on the gavel, the fledgling agency developed a plan that has served the area well ever since.

"The toughest thing was turning people down," says Mr. Lane – especially when their proposals might be in conflict with a plan that hadn't been finished.

"We weren't anti-development, but we were concerned about the quality of the Bay and setting priorities," Mr. Lane recalls. "Housing and offices don't need to be on the shoreline."

In the plan adopted in 1968, the commission gave priority to uses that were dependent on the Bay, such as shipping, fishing and recre-

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On this Earth Day,
Craig Breon – and
many others – work
to restore Bay for
wild creatures,
recreation, health,
and beauty.

San Francisco Bay is known round the world. One of the planet's great estuaries, it drains 40 percent of California through the Golden Gate. And it gives identity and focus to the lives of seven million people who live here.

No wonder the sponsors of Earth Day 2002 are celebrating the Bay on April 20 and throughout the month. There will be hikes, festivals, sunrise gatherings, and work days around the Bay to celebrate its beauties and tackle its problems.

In this Earth Day cover story, the Almanac will take a personal tour of our local Bayfront, give an overview of Earth Day activities, and a list of resources for people who want to know or do more.

Sniffing the crisp, clean breeze off San Francisco Bay, Craig Breon remembers when he first saw the Bay in 1970, at age 5 when his family moved here. It stank.

"I remember holding my nose when I was near the Bay. It really smelled bad," says Mr. Breon, a Portola Valley planning commissioner and executive director of the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society.

That was two years before the Clean Water Act, Mr. Breon says. The Bay was a giant cesspool, with dozens of sewage plants and industries dumping slightly treated sewage and industrial waste directly into the Bay.

Today's fresh breeze gives a measure of the distance the Bay has come in the last 30 years. Sewage plants have moved to tertiary treatment, and industrial discharges have been to a large extent controlled.

But by other measures, San Francisco Bay, the greatest estuary on the Pacific Coast, is still far from the pristine bay – alive with fish and birds – observed and settled by early explorers.

Starting with the Gold Rush, busy people diked, filled, farmed, and built on most of the salt marshes and mud flats surrounding the Bay. By 1960, more than 90 percent of the

Bay's original wetlands were gone, and the Bay itself had shrunk in area by more than a third – from 680 to 430 square miles. Much of downtown San Francisco – from Hunters Point to the Marina – is built on Bay fill.

Forty years later, the tide has turned, and San Francisco Bay is improving, thanks to the environmental movement, a spate of new laws, and widespread appreciation for the value of the Bay for business, shipping, recreation, wildlife, fisheries, flood control, water quality, and – above all – quality of life.

Earth Day celebrants will be enjoying the Bay and helping restore it. At the same time

they will be learning about it, and gaining energy to tackle challenges that lie ahead.

While far healthier than in 1960, San Francisco Bay still faces a mixture of problems and promise.

Typical of the problems is the collision of cultures embodied in San Francisco International Airport's effort to fill a square mile of Bay to extend its runways.

The greatest promise in generations for expanding the Bay would be conversion of diked salt ponds that fringe the Bay to tidal

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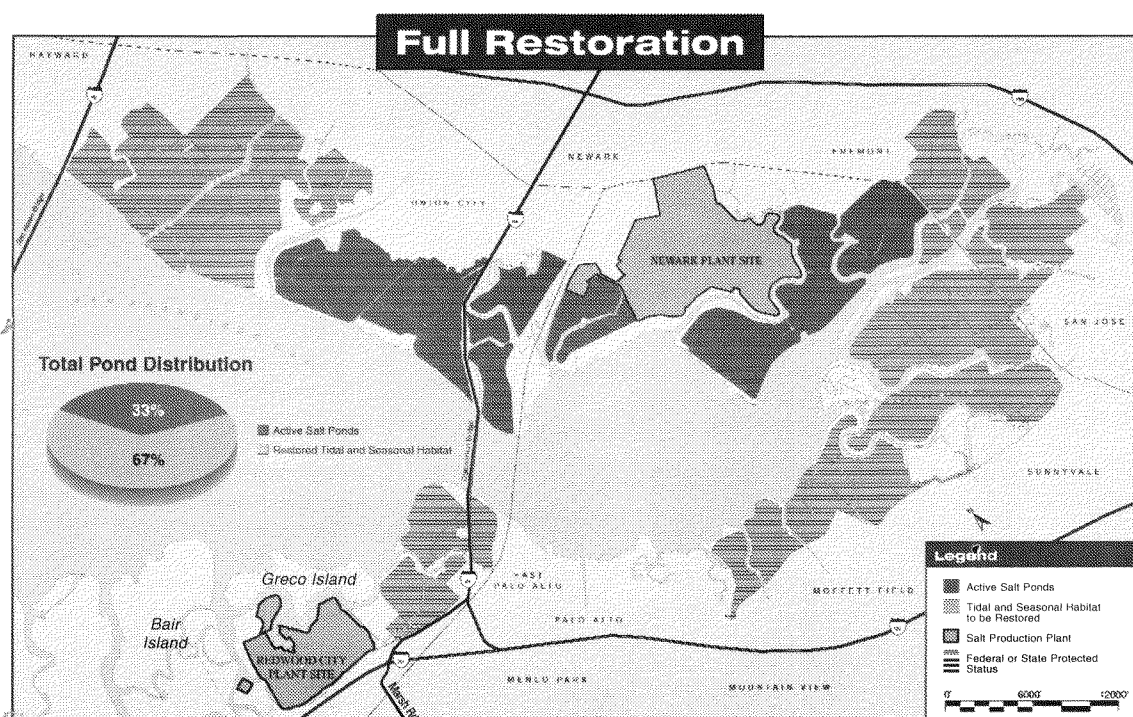


Photo by Thomas Rountree

Black-necked stilt in Palo Alto Baylands also in salt ponds.



Photo by Audubon Society



An announcement could come soon of the sale of 16,500 acres of salt ponds in the South and West Bay to the federal government for inclusion in the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge. Some are already in the refuge; others would be added to it for partial restoration to tidal marsh. Cargill Salt Co. would continue producing salt on 12,000 acres of ponds surrounding its Newark plant in the East Bay. A total of 1,400 acres of crystallizer beds and the site of the landmark salt pile in Redwood City are not part of the deal; they could be developed – under regulation by the Bay Conservation and Development Commission and other agencies.

◆ CELEBRATING THE BAY

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action and living marsh. U.S. Sen. Dianne Feinstein, D-Calif., is optimistic that negotiations will be successful to buy from Cargill Salt Co. 16,500 acres of salt ponds rimming the south and west Bay. The price: \$100 million.

"It's an opportunity to turn the clock back to something no one has seen since before the Gold Rush," says Lori Johnson, spokesperson for Cargill. "I think it's reasonably close."

Nearby Baylands

Squatting at the edge of a salt marsh at the Palo Alto Baylands, Craig Breon breaks off a tip of pickleweed and samples its salty tang. "It's fun to show this to

school kids," he comments.

Pickleweed and associated salt-loving plants are key to the biological richness of salt marshes, which support an extraordinary diversity of life, as well as fisheries that are important to the Bay Area economy.

Because so few tidal marshes are left around the Bay, many of their inhabitants have become endangered. Like the secretive clapper rail and the tiny salt marsh harvest mouse.

"The salt marsh harvest mouse is the only land mammal that lives entirely on salt water," says Mr. Breon enthusiastically. "It eats pickleweed and sweats salt."

The Palo Alto Baylands are one of the largest natural tidal marsh areas remaining in the South Bay,

notes Mr. Breon. "This looks like what was here historically. This is what we want to re-create."

As a peregrine falcon overhead swoops at a crow defending her nest, Mr. Breon points out elements of the Bay-edge ecosystem. Mud flats extend half a mile offshore, feeding shorebirds at low tide. Tidal sloughs snake through the marshes, carrying life-giving nutrients to their creatures. Just to the north, San Francisquito Creek welcomes steelhead trout returning to their ancestral home each winter to spawn in its headwaters in Menlo Park, Woodside and Portola Valley. "You really want a mix of habitats," he says.

The tidal marshes have other, more practical values, Mr. Breon says. They filter pollutants and

improve water quality; they absorb high water and provide protection from floods. "They are like huge sponges," he says, then adds impishly, "I'm a fan of floods. They remind us we're not in total control."

Recreation is another huge value of the Bay, Mr. Breon notes. As a kid he remembers the joy of sailing around Alcatraz and through the Golden Gate. And he first fell in the Bay – repeatedly – around Redwood City. He was learning windsurfing out of Pete's Harbor from a teacher at Menlo School. "It was neat," he recalls.

What's ahead?

From the summit of Mt. Trashmore (once the Marsh Road Dump, now Bayfront Park,) you can see the past – and several possible futures – of San Francisco Bay.

A major opportunity lies to the south, toward the Dumbarton Bridge. Here, salt ponds – tidal marshes diked a century or more ago to provide salt for people, animals and industry – may someday return to tidal marsh, if negotiations for their purchase bear fruit.

Toward the Bay lies Greco Island, a remaining natural marsh that somehow escaped the craze of filling and developing. Inwards from Greco Island lies the old Marsh Road sewage plant. While the plant was closed to allow better sewage treatment at a new plant in Redwood City, its ponds are still maintained to hold excess flow when winter storms overwhelm the capacity of the system.

Bayfront Park itself – the only hill on this side of the Bay south of Coyote Point – is another reminder of earlier common uses of Baylands. For more than 50 years, Menlo Park's Marsh Road Dump accepted garbage, trash and debris from the rapidly growing communities surrounding it. Early on, pigs would scavenge the garbage; later it piled up – covered with dirt every night – as a sanitary landfill jokingly called "Mt. Trashmore."

Occasionally the visitor still gets a whiff of that history. Much of the gas from still-rotting garbage fuels the noisy generator that drowns out the calls of seabirds as it converts methane from the dump to electricity for the grid.

The placid scene to the north of Bayfront Park embodies problems, opportunity and controversy.

Flood Slough, dredged as an old ship channel with turnaround still visible at the park entrance, is still living marsh with lots of wading birds and – more recently – Canada geese.

However, the quilt of salt ponds just beyond the marsh is a prime candidate for development. The plant site and the crystallizer ponds south of Seaport Boulevard are not part of the proposed purchase of salt ponds in the South Bay. As Cargill phases out salt production on this side of the Bay, it is likely to sell off

these ponds. The landmark salt pile is already gone, and the company has sold the 17 acres where it sat to Abbott Labs, which plans a new campus.

In addition, on the shoreward side of these salt ponds is the proposed route to extend the Bayfront Expressway to Seaport Boulevard and Route 84 in Redwood City.

Looking over the ponds, which turn vivid pink and orange in the fall, just before the salt is harvested, Mr. Breon understates the challenge: "That's going to be very controversial," he says.

From pond to marsh

It was during the Gold Rush that people first started digging clumsy dikes on the edge of the Bay to trap seawater until it evaporated, leaving behind a scum of valuable salt.

Salt-making has expanded over the last 150 years, until today Cargill Salt can harvest 1.3 million tons of salt per year in 29,000 acres of diked ponds ringing San Francisco Bay.

The salt migrates from pond to pond, at ever-greater concentrations, until it ends up in crystallizers pink with brine shrimp, near the plant in Newark. "It takes five years for a molecule of salt to get from the Bay to the top of the salt stack," says Ms. Johnson.

Now Cargill's apparent willingness to sell 16,500 acres in the South Bay to the federal government has Bay lovers ecstatic. They dream of breaching levees and restoring much of the South Bay to tide-washed marsh, mud, and wildlife. The \$100 million tab would come from federal and state sources and private foundations.

"Our goal is to get the clapper rail off the endangered species list," says Mr. Breon. "That would mean the South Bay is healthy."

But restoring diked ponds to living Bay will be neither quick nor cheap. "You can't just cut a hole in a levee," says Ms. Johnson.

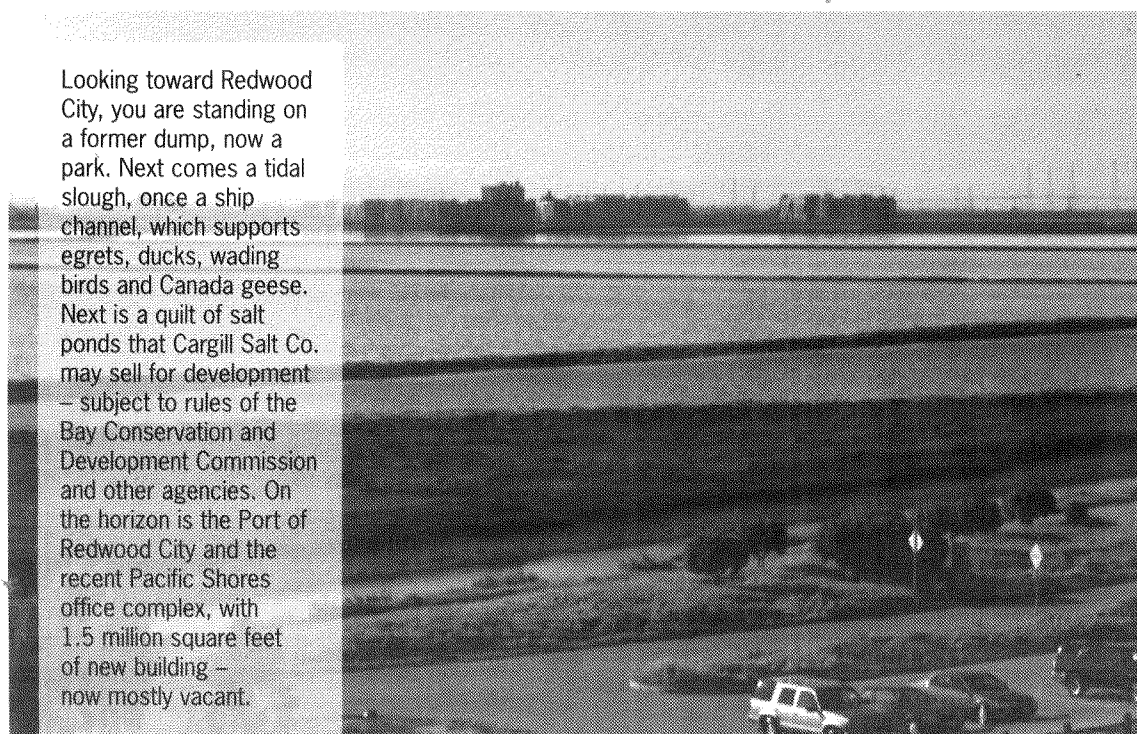
Among the major problems are dealing with toxic contaminants that have accumulated in the ponds, and subsidence. Particularly in the South Bay, many of the ponds have settled below sea level, and so have parts of Alviso, Milpitas, and San Jose. "Flooding is a real concern," says Mr. Breon. "Alviso is six feet under water, including the Cisco Systems campus."

Marge Kolar, director of the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge, will be directing the project as the salt ponds become an active part of the refuge. "It's going to be a long planning process and a long restoration process," she says. She estimates \$100 million over quite a few years.

"We can do the easiest first, and do it slowly over time," says Mr. Breon.

Refuge officials have lots of support from local citizens, ad-

Continued on next page ◆



This view from Menlo Park's Bayfront Park shows many facets of the past and future of San Francisco Bay.



Photo by Robin Smith

Volunteers from Sequoia Audubon Society pull up ice plant on Middle Bair Island to help prepare for its restoration to living marsh. Jean Halford of Atherton, super-volunteer Pete Popin of Burlingame, and others are brought over about once a month when the tide is right, by volunteer boaters from the Docktown Marina.

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vocacy groups, and nonprofits.

Already, Bair Island, a barren expanse of former salt ponds at the end of Whipple Avenue in Redwood City, is being restored. In a conservation coup, the Peninsula Open Space Trust bought a key part of the vast island, seemingly destined for another Redwood Shores-type development, from its Japanese owner in 1997. Now volunteers from the Sequoia Audubon Society come out several times a month to pull up ice plant and other non-native plants, while the wildlife refuge com-

pletes plans to restore its 3,000 acres to the Bay.

In another example, the one-man advocacy program that Mr. Breon launched when he went to work for the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society in 1994 has grown into a major campaign by the National Audubon Society. The influential organization has given restoring the Bay the same priority as bringing back the Florida Everglades. Eyes sparkling Mr. Breon says, "We're talking about 100,000 to 120,000 acres around the Bay — from Alviso to Suisun Bay — to be restored to wetlands." ■

◆ EARTH DAY EVENTS

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tour, sunrise service on top of San Bruno Mountain. Shuttles service. Information: visit www.BayAreaEarthDay.net/BayWalk, or call 320-8699.

■ **Earth Day Forum.** "Water Distribution in California: the Coming Crisis," April 18, 7-9 p.m., Palo Alto City Hall.

■ **Creek cleanup,** sponsored by Acterra's San Francisco Watershed Council, April 20, 9:30 a.m.-12:30 p.m. Meet in El Palo Alto Park in Palo Alto, corner of Alma St. and Palo Alto Ave. Wear sturdy shoes, dress in layers, and bring hat, sunscreen and a friend.

Materials, including gloves, bags, snacks and drinks, will be provided. Information: Susan Fizzel, 962-9876, ext. 305. Visit acterra.org/watershed.

■ **Build trails** at Arastradero Preserve in Palo Alto, April 21, 8:45 a.m.-3 p.m. Lunch provided. Call Karen Cotter at 329-8544 to sign up.

■ **Sunrise ceremony.** Dance, music, poetry, 6 a.m.-7:15 a.m. Monday, April 22, at Marsh Road and Bayfront Park in Menlo Park.

■ **Coyote Point.** Family Discovery Day. Puppet shows, composting demos, crafts, videos, hike for Family Discovery Earth Day. April 21, 1-5 p.m. Free with admission. Coyote Point Museum, 1651 Coyote Point Drive, San Mateo. Call 324-7755.

◆ THANK

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ation. "These priorities still govern the commission," he says.

After seven years chairing the commission, Mr. Lane took his skills to a larger but equally contentious arena. He was first chairman of the California Coastal Commission, which applied the Bay Conservation and Development Commission model to the far larger challenges of curbing the sprawl that threatened the California Coast.

In 1998, the California League of Conservation Voters gave Mel Lane its Conservationist of the Year Award. "If you take a look around California, you would be hard pressed to find a place of beauty that Mel hasn't played a part in preserving," the citation said.

Mr. Lane is troubled by the latest threat to the Bay — the effort by San Francisco to expand its airport runways into the Bay, possibly creating as much as a square mile of new fill. The Bay plan, he notes, says the Bay should not be filled for airports, unless there is no viable alternative.

"I'm still in a quandary," Mr. Lane says. "A good airport is important to the Bay area, and the quality of the Bay is as important."

Mr. Lane hopes that technology or scientific studies still to be completed will help clarify the choices. "A tremendous amount of homework still has to be done," he says.

Craig Breon, executive director of the Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society, has no such doubts. He fears the fill might further stifle the sluggish circulation in the South Bay, so that parts could go stagnant.

"It's too complex to predict," he says. "The best experts can give is an educated guess. I'd hate to risk the South Bay on an educated guess."

Mr. Lane has some advice for future protectors of the Bay. "Eternal vigilance is the answer," he concludes. "You never solve things. You go day to day, and keep pushing." ■

RESOURCES

For more information on the Bay and related programs, check these sources. Phone numbers and Web sites are provided.

- Acterra: 962-9876; acterra.org
- Audubon Society. Santa Clara Valley Chapter: 408-252-3748; scvas.org. Sequoia Chapter: 369-1093; sequoia-audubon.org
- Bay Area Earth Day: BayAreaEarthDay.net
- Bay Conservation and Development Commission (BCDC): 415-352-3600; bcdc.ca.gov
- California Academy of Sciences: 415-750-7318; calacademy.org
- Cargill Salt Co: 510-797-1820; cargillsalt.com/sfbay
- Committee for Green Foothills: 968-7243; GreenFoothills.org
- Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge: 510-792-0222; desfbay.fws.gov
- Environmental Volunteers: 961-0545; evols.org
- Marine Science Institute: 364-2760; sfbaymsi.org
- Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District: 691-1200; openspace.org
- Peninsula Open Space Trust: 854-7696; openspacetrust.org
- Save the Bay: 510-452-9261; savesfbay.org
- Sierra Club, Loma Prieta Chapter: 390-8411; lomaprieta.sierraclub.org



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