

Changing the future

Story by Marion Softky
Almanac Staff Writer

Three conservation organizations helped change the future of the Peninsula from 'Los Angeles North' to mostly open Bayfront, foothills, mountains and coast

Not many people remember the 1960 San Mateo County Master Plan. Yet this pioneering document lays out a vision for what San Mateo County would look like in 1990 that few of today's residents would recognize — or welcome.

In 1960, at the height of California's post-war building boom, San Mateo County was planning for a population of 800,000 by 1990. The late William Spangle of Ladera led the team that created one of the first master plans in California to accommodate the growth that was sweeping the Golden State.

To today's eyes, much of the plan jars with our present reality. Key aspects of its vision — freeways down the Bay and coast, BART down the Peninsula, heliports, lakes — have not happened.

Instead, San Mateo County is still mostly rural outside the dense urban corridor down the Bayside. Large tracts along the edge of San Francisco Bay are still natural and being restored. From Interstate 280, over the hills to the outskirts of Half Moon Bay and Pacifica, and south to the Santa Cruz County line, the county's incomparable coast is still mostly open.

Why? What happened to stem the powerful spread of megalopolis into San Francisco

Bay, over the hills, and down the coastal terraces south of Half Moon Bay?

One of many things that happened was the environmental movement. Starting in the early 1960s and growing through the 1970s, grassroots groups started saying no to growth, and government agencies followed their lead. "Save the Bay" became a rallying cry, and the state established the Bay Conservation and Development Commission (BCDC) to stop

ter, clean air, and endangered species.

On the Peninsula, three organizations that are celebrating key anniversaries this year helped change many areas of the master plan from urban yellow to open-space green, and make many green areas permanent:

■ The Committee for Green Foothills was founded in 1962 to fight the development crawling up the foothills above Stanford.

■ The Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District (MROSD) was created in 1972 as a government agency to buy and manage open space for low-intensity recreation and natural resources.

■ The Peninsula Open Space Trust (POST) is a private, non-profit land trust founded in 1977 to help buy and save Peninsula lands, many of which are now part of MROSD's open space.

Over two generations, these organizations, and their allies in and out of government, have cumulatively made extraordinary changes in the future of San Mateo County. Working through political action, government purchase, and private finance, they have helped preserve tens of thousands of acres for open space, agriculture, recreation, and natural habitat. Most of the

unincorporated Coastside is still open — a large green swath on current plans.

"The whole mindset was so incredibly different," says George Mader of Ladera, who worked on the 1960 master plan, and has served as town planner for Portola Valley since it incorporated in 1964. People



Photo by Brian O'Neill / Courtesy POST

A couple of lizards try to warm themselves on a rock in wildlands preserved by POST. In trying to "Save the Endangered Coast," POST is taking on challenges of encouraging farming and recreation, while restoring land, water and natural habitat.

rampant filling of San Francisco Bay, and to control uses along its shores. Neighborhoods arose and blocked the building of freeways — including the Willow Freeway and later the Willow Expressway in Menlo Park.

Nationally, Congress passed revolutionary laws protecting the environment, clean wa-

LEFT: Ferns flourish under redwoods on the 1,300 acres of meadow and forest, rising from the Golden Gate National Recreation Area.

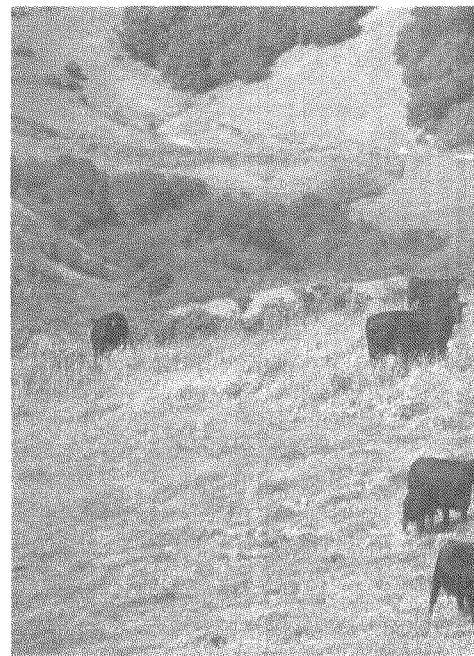


Photo by Kathleen T. Carr / Courtesy POST

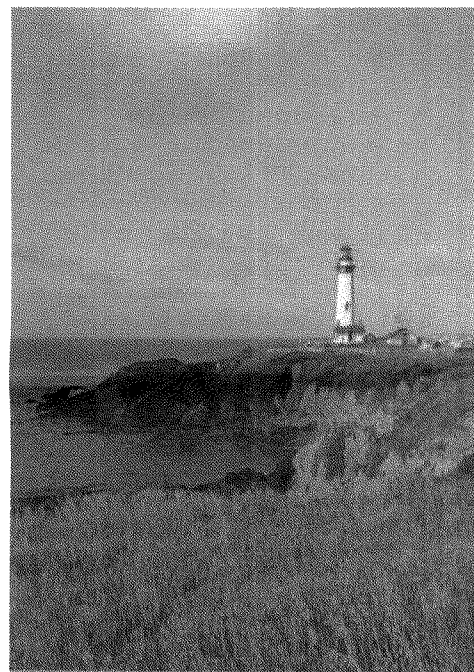


Photo by Robert Buelteman / Courtesy POST

then weren't thinking about water quality or air quality or toxic waste. "Recycling had never been heard of. They were still burning dumps," he says.

"The Midpeninsula was the incubator for both planning and environmental efforts that are now taken for granted," says Lennie Roberts of Ladera, who has represented the Committee for Green Foothills in San Mateo County for almost 25 years. "These three organizations have made tremendous strides in preserving open space."

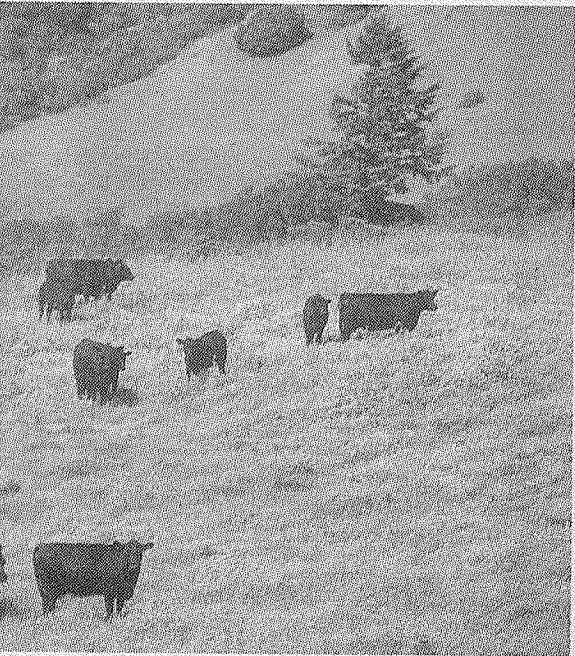
Audrey Rust, president of POST, agrees. "We all benefit from each other. We depend on work they've done," she says, quickly adding, "We don't always agree with each other."

Now that the foothills and Skyline are mostly secure, the organizations have a new vision, and a new challenge: to save the Coastside. "This is the only undeveloped, accessible coast adjacent to a metropolitan area in the world. It's amazing," says Mrs. Rust. "We have incredible diversity under immediate threat. But we have an immediate obligation to ourselves and to the future to see that these lands aren't lost forever."

In 2000, POST launched a campaign to raise \$200 million to save more than 20,000 acres on the Coastside. Next year MROSD will continue its effort to annex the San Ma-

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leger Estate. In 1990 POST saved from development the Edgewood Road to Skyline. Now it is a national park, part



ABOVE: Cattle still graze on the 3,681-acre Driscoll Ranch, west of Skyline in La Honda, which was recently acquired by POST. POST plans to manage the land for conservation grazing that is compatible with protecting wildlife and providing opportunities for recreation.



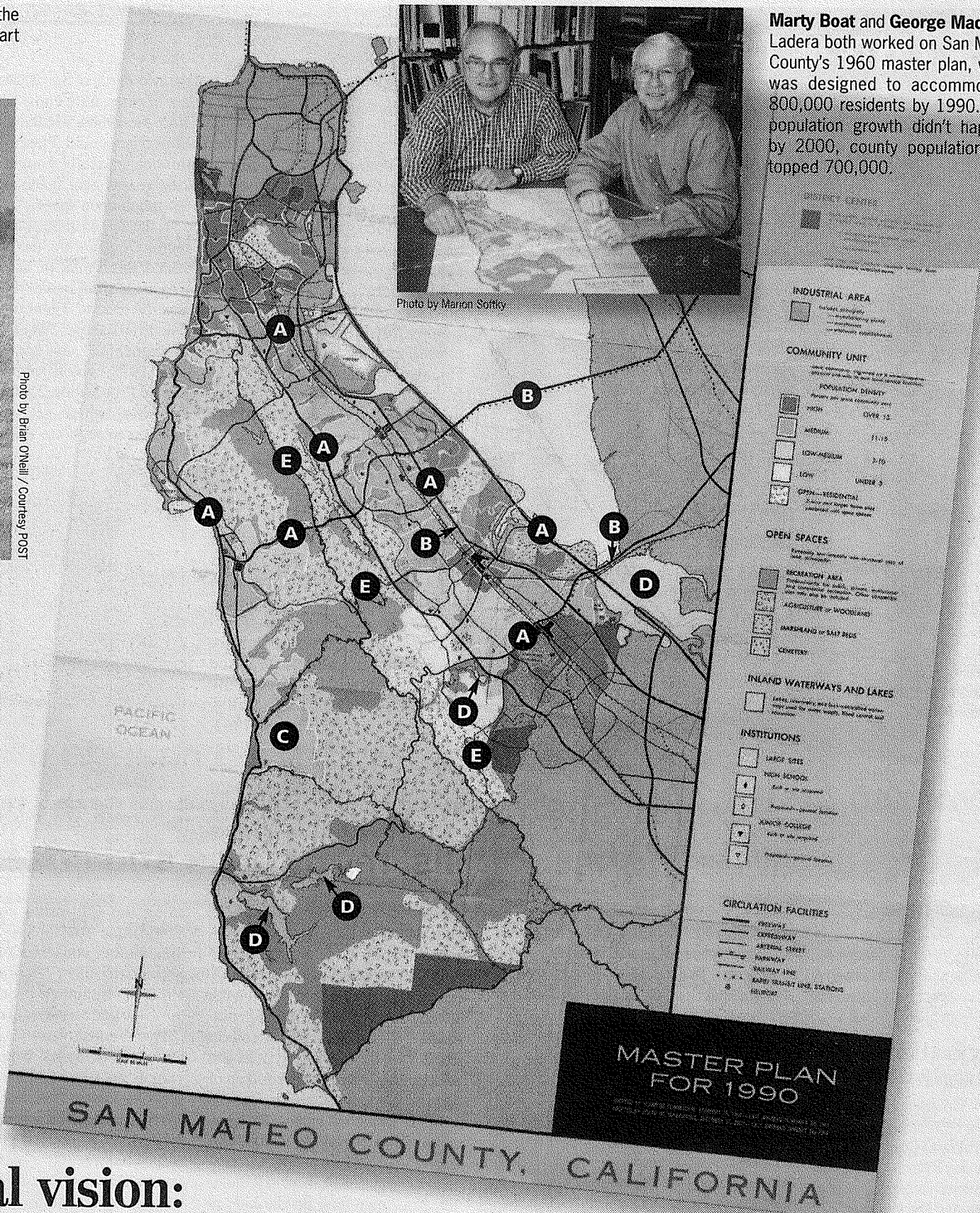
LEFT: This photo of landmark Pigeon Point Lighthouse looks pristine because POST bought three acres of Whalers Cove, just south of the landmark, and tore down a nine-unit motel under construction, that would have blocked a beautiful view, closed access to the beach, and possibly polluted the ocean.



As president of POST, **Audrey Rust** wheels and deals to raise Silicon Valley money to preserve open space.



Olive Mayer of Woodside has been fighting conservation battles for 40 years.



Marty Boat and **George Mader** of Ladera both worked on San Mateo County's 1960 master plan, which was designed to accommodate 800,000 residents by 1990. That population growth didn't happen; by 2000, county population just topped 700,000.

Partial vision: San Mateo County Master Plan of 1960

So much has changed in 40 years.

The San Mateo County Master Plan for 1990, adopted by the county Board of Supervisors at its last meeting in 1960, gives a comparison. The vision then for the county's future differs startlingly from the vision embodied in today's official plans.

George Mader and Marty Boat of Ladera both worked on the pioneering master plan for the county, developed under the leadership of the late Bill Spangle, also of Ladera.

In those booming years after World War II, the county was preparing to accommodate 800,000 people by 1990. "We had the population projections and built the plans to meet them. The growth seemed to be unstoppable," says Mr. Mader, who has been town planner for Portola Valley

since it incorporated in 1964.

Some highlights from the master plan: (SEE ABOVE MAP)

A Four freeways would carry traffic north and south, and three, east and west. The plan included a Bayfront Freeway extending into the Bay, passing east of the San Francisco International Airport; a Coast Freeway slashing through the mountains to connect to Santa Cruz; and a Willow Freeway connecting a new barrier across the South Bay to Skyline and San Gregorio.

B BART is shown extending down the Peninsula and crossing the Bay at the San Mateo Bridge and the new Dumbarton dike. There would be heliports every seven or eight miles.

C Residential communities would overflow the Bayside, and extend urban development down

the coast as far as San Gregorio.

D The plan envisions several new lakes: a freshwater lake replacing the tidal Bay south of the Dumbarton Barrier; a lake in the mountains above Pescadero to provide recreation and a water supply for new development on the coast; and the Ladera Dam on Stanford's Webb Ranch to provide recreation and flood control.

E Major roads included the Alpine Parkway connecting the Bayside to the lake at Pescadero; Skyline Parkway extended north through the watershed; and a continuation of Edgewood road wound over Skyline to Half Moon Bay.

For many reasons — not least the environmental movement and the new laws it spawned — the growth driving the county's 1960 master plan was lower than projected. Instead of 800,000 people, San Mateo County

had a population of 650,000 in 1990, and just over 700,000 in 2000.

Now, the county's general plan (no longer called a master plan) shows much of the unincorporated Coastsides as open space, with zoning for large lots. It is massively constrained by federal and state laws, as well as commissions protecting the Coastsides and Bay.

The plan follows the strategy known as smart growth, which calls for concentrating urban growth in populated areas served by mass transportation.

"Other regions struggle to rein in sprawl and draw the greenbelt around themselves," Supervisor Rich Gordon said at a 30th anniversary celebration of the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District. "On this Peninsula we did smart growth before it was smart." ■

neither the money nor the flexibility to deal with many private landowners and buy the lands needed. They tapped Portola Valley venture capitalist Ward Paine, and other leaders in booming Silicon Valley, to form a private, nonprofit land trust, which could expand the district's ability to preserve land.

Enter POST, formed in December 1977.

POST helps the district in three ways, Mrs. Rust explains. It can operate in private, act faster, and make deals that government agencies are barred from; it can deal with landowners who don't want to work with the government; and it can raise private money. "I remember thinking: Wouldn't it be great if we could raise a million dollars?" Mrs. Rust chuckles.

POST has been phenomenally successful. It has saved some 50,000 acres, worth many, many millions of dollars. Much of the land has been sold to the open space district, but other lands are part of state and national parks. POST also owns and manages several thousand acres of farm and ranch land on the Coastside.

Landmark Windy Hill, which rises open and beautiful above Portola Valley, was POST's first major acquisition in 1981. It can be seen from the teeming Bayside from Redwood City to Mountain View as a symbol of the green revolution that has swept the rural Peninsula. POST acquired Windy Hill as a gift from Ryland Kelley and Corte Madera Associates, then sold it to MROSD for \$1.5 million — half its value — and used the purchase price to create its revolving land-acquisition fund.

"When people look at Windy Hill, they know it's open," says Mrs. Rust. "They know it's not L.A. here."

Mrs. Rust is proud of POST's acquisitions, which spell the difference between sprawling city and living land. Its 187-plus acquisitions include: Bair Island, at the foot of Whipple Avenue in Redwood City; the Phleger Estate, climbing the hill from Canada Road to Skyline; the Cowell Ranch, with cliffs and Brussels sprouts just south of Half Moon Bay; Cloverdale Coastal Ranch, between Butano State Park and Ano Nuevo State Reserve.

Now POST is concentrating on saving the coast for nature, farming, natural resources, and recreation. It's more than half way toward its goal of raising \$200 million to buy 20,000 endangered acres.

"Our challenge is to be able to acquire key large pieces of open space that allow us to construct a permanent conservation landscape," Mrs. Rust explains. "We're talking about a variety of uses compatible with conservation, like farming or sustainable timber harvesting. We have to serve the urban population



Photos by Lennie Roberts

While the Coastside has been saved from Daly-City-type row houses, more and more people want to build large homes, such as this 21,000 square-foot landmark near Montara (top picture). Conservationists want to preserve the scale and rural ambience of the region's historic farms.

through low-intensity recreation."

Challenges ahead

Over the last 40 years, the challenges to forging a sustainable and benign environment on the Peninsula have changed. And thanks to new conservation rules, the challenges are quite different on the urban Bayside of the county than they are on the still-rural coast.

"In this county, we have been successful in separating the urban from the rural — permanently. That's crucial," says Mrs. Roberts of the Committee for Green Foothills. "On the Bayside, we drew a line around the cities and said, 'This is it.'"

On the Bayside, where transportation and housing problems are horrendous, cities and the county are working toward what is called "smart growth." They are trying to direct higher-density growth and affordable housing toward city centers and transportation corridors.

On the Coastside, with all its protections, the threat is no longer the row-houses and urban sprawl envisioned in 1960. "The coast is under threat from very large mini-mansions. People are building second and third, and even fourth homes," says Mrs. Rust.

Mrs. Roberts and the Committee for Green Foothills share the concern about the influx of applications for mega-houses. "You want to maintain the coast as an agricultural area," she says. "Putting monster houses that would look OK in Atherton or

Hillsborough out there in the farm fields is not appropriate."

Next year could be decisive. POST hopes to complete its acquisition drive. And MROSD will be going through legal procedures to gain approval for extending the district into the Coastside. Under its proposal, Coastside residents would be able to vote for district board members, but would not pay taxes to the district. The district would then have authority to buy and manage open space for low-intensity recreation, and preservation of natural resources and agriculture.

Even though MROSD has agreed to give up the power of eminent domain on the coast, and promises to buy land only from willing sellers, the plan to extend the district still faces strong local opposition.

Wallace Stegner spoke for the groups that are trying to fulfill the dream of a healthy, rural Coastside: "Every green natural place we save saves a fragment of our sanity and gives us a little more hope that we have a future." ■

■ INFORMATION

To reach:

■ **Committee for Green Foothills**, 3921 E. Bayshore Road, Palo Alto, CA 94303; 968-7243; www.GreenFoothills.org.

■ **Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District**, 330 Distel Circle, Los Altos, CA 94022; 691-1200; www.openspace.org.

■ **Peninsula Open Space Trust**, 3000 Sand Hill Road, Suite 4-135, Menlo Park, CA 94025; 854-7696; www.openspacetrust.org.

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