

THE POINT

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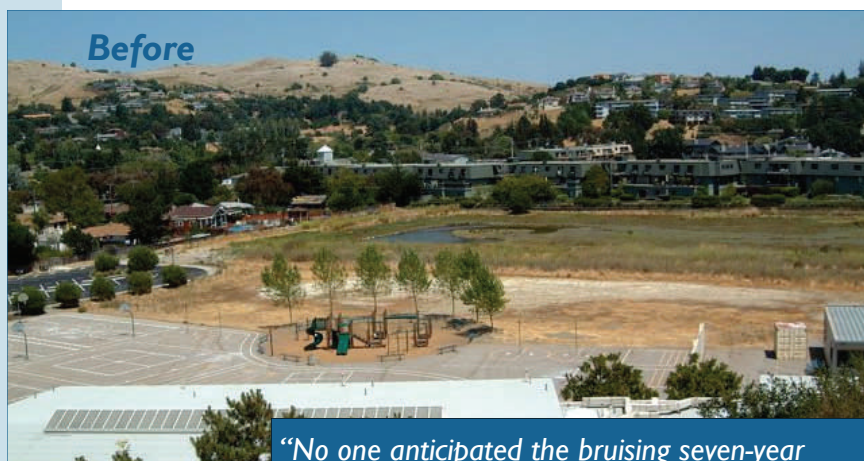
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2008: A Wetlands/Field Odyssey *Tammy Edmonson*

The plan to reopen Strawberry Point School in 2000 met the usual challenges of any public project: community outreach, a bond measure, environmental review.... But no one anticipated the bruising seven-year community crusade that would be required before the school could reclaim its playfield and fully engage its students in the long-awaited wetlands restoration and education program at the site.



The trouble started shortly before the scheduled reopening, when the Mill Valley School District's environmental consultant noted that a portion of the playfield had recently begun to flood in the winter and would therefore be designated a

"degraded seasonal wetland." The seasonal flooding was not a natural feature of the site; the area was overrun with non-native vegetation; and because the playfield area was constantly disturbed by noise, foot and vehicle traffic, it tended to attract predominantly urbanized bird species. Still, the consultant explained, any wetland designation meant that the District could not restore the playfield without first satisfying an array of federal, state and local environmental mitigation and permitting requirements.

The consultant proposed a solution whereby the

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After



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school could renovate the playfield *and* mitigate for the loss of the new seasonal wetland by expanding and restoring an equal or greater area of the school's higher-value, on-site tidal wetlands. The proposal offered attractive environmental and educational benefits in that: (1) it would remove bay fill and non-native vegetation, returning undeveloped areas of the site to their original, natural condition as tidal marsh; (2) it would provide students access and visibility to study the otherwise obscured on-site tidal wetlands; and (3) it would be a perfect vehicle for the hands-on bay and wetlands study program that the school was anxious to develop. Unfortunately, the District lacked the resources to pursue such an ambitious and legally-complex undertaking and so deferred the project indefinitely.

Once the school reopened, the community quickly recognized and embraced the physical and environmental education objectives of the wetlands/field restoration as a top priority for current and future students. Parent volunteers began investigating what it would take to bring the project to fruition using community funds and resources. Although success was by no means assured, the PTA membership enthusiastically undertook to channel the energy and funds that had begun flowing to the project. Ultimately, a Wetlands/Field Restoration Committee was formed to oversee the project comprised of district and PTA representatives, the school principal (thanks Leslie!) and volunteer parent professionals in the fields of science, architecture, construction, engineering, journalism and law.

Design and construction would be large enough hurdles, but before we got there, the Committee needed expert guidance to optimize the environmental benefits of the project and guide us through the multi-agency permitting process. In the years that followed, the Committee would employ and oversee multiple environmental consulting firms, a landscape architect, restoration, hydrological and soils engineers, among others.



Our hopes were repeatedly buoyed by professional assessments that substantially underestimated the amount of time, money and expertise that would be required to complete the Wetlands/Field Restoration Project. The cost estimates gradually swelled from \$100,000 to \$500,000 and the permitting time frame stretched from six months to several years. At the same time, the project's dual objectives gained increasing urgency as the school steadily grew to its current record enrollment of well over 300 students: playground injuries and overcrowding steadily worsened, while the community's commitment to environmental education continually deepened. (Throughout the journey, everyone worked to optimize the environmental education program at the site: parents built and staffed the learning garden; the PTA funded partnerships with the Richardson Bay Audubon Society and the Headlands Institute as well as a naturalist for hands-on

environmental learning; and the entire student body participated in creating the wetlands mosaic at the entry to the campus.) So it was that, despite the escalating cost and complexity, the PTA renewed its commitment to the project year after year through multiple meetings, votes and fundraisers.

Because this was very much a community project, the Wetlands/Field Committee placed a high priority on community outreach. Early on, committee members went door to door in the immediate neighborhood describing the project and soliciting community concerns. We talked with representatives from numerous environmental groups (including National Audubon Society, Bay Institute and Save the Bay) and political representatives at the state, local and congressional levels. We held countless tours for parents, students, and interested community leaders. The feedback we received was overwhelmingly positive until the Committee met with representatives of the Marin Audubon Society.

Marin Audubon made clear that, consistent with its policy, it would actively oppose this or any project in Marin County that displaced any part of any wetland—regardless of its man-made

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origins; regardless of the nature and purpose of the project; regardless of the value of the proposed mitigation; and regardless of the considerable environmental benefits that multiple environmental experts were convinced would accrue. We received this disheartening news just as we were poised to begin our first public hearings in the permit process.

It was evident that nothing short of our abandoning the field restoration would satisfy the Marin Audubon policy. Nevertheless, the Wetlands/Field Committee searched for some form of accommodation and arrived at the current design which shaved 1/3 acre off the southern end of the playfield to create a protected and enhanced seasonal wetland habitat, in addition to the tidal wetland expansion and restoration already proposed. Still, Marin Audubon was not satisfied and made good on its promise to use all of its resources to vigorously oppose our project throughout the permitting process where they repeatedly characterized our community and the school district as environmentally heedless “developers”.

Ironically, Marin Audubon’s opposition to the project caught the attention of conservative media outlet, Fox News, which portrayed the issue as pitting kids against birds and sought to spin the story in national coverage as “Bay Area environmentalism run amok.” Committee members declined to rise to that bait in televised interviews to the evident frustration of the Fox reporter.

Still, the community kept the faith through hearings and appeals, national and local press coverage, petitions, letter writing campaigns, and countless fundraisers. Finally, seven years and eleven governmental agencies later, we had firm construction plans and all the necessary permits in hand. But it was still too soon for celebration. At the conclusion of the competitive bidding process, the project cost had, once again, swelled substantially beyond our means. Enter the Schow Family. Although their children had both moved on to middle school, and despite having already supported the project with generous grants through their family foundation, the Schows stepped in with another tremendous gift to fill the funding gap which allow the project to go forward!

This project never would have come to life without the hundreds of community volunteers who dedicated thousands of hours and contributed hundreds of thousands of dollars in the hope of improving education and the environment in our local community. It’s been a bumpy ride, but the experience has redoubled my faith in the power of collective action. In a community with as much heart and talent as this one, I now believe that the possibilities are endless.

Construction Finally Begins! *by Anne Romero*



On June 10th, 2007 the perseverance and dedication of our community finally paid off and our building permit was issued by the United States Army Corps of Engineers. This permit represented combined approval all reviewing agencies under a joint “JARPA” permit. Little did we know, our modest project required one of the most complex permit and reviewing processes of all types of construction. With the issuance of the Army Corps of Engineer Permit, our Strawberry Point School Wetlands/ Field restoration project had cleared the permitting process and received permits and approval from:

1. The Bay Conservation and Development District
2. United States Army Corps of Engineers
3. United States Fish and Game
4. California Fish and Wildlife
5. San Francisco Bay Regional Water Quality control board
6. Strawberry Design review board
7. Marin County Community Development Agency
8. National Oceanographic and Atmospheric (NOA) fisheries
9. Marin County Flood Control District
10. California Environmental Protection Agency

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This project had also been supported by the Marin County Planning Department (in fact, it was thought a commendable project) and supported by Supervisor McGlashen, himself a known environmental advocate and Marin Sierra Club President.

We were off to construction!

But there was one more obstacle to overcome towards achieving our goal: Time. To reduce disturbance to the environment during the critical wet period, all heavy grading (moving of soils) must be completed prior to October 15th for the winter rainy season. If we missed this window, our project would have to wait until the following April 15th, thus exposing the project to potential cost increases and potential Audubon legal action. Anticipating this time constraint and desiring to be proactive, the committee quickly moved to publicly advertise the project and solicit construction bids as

required under State School Guidelines in May of 2007, (well in advance of the issuance of the building permit), and again in June of 2007. Hanford ARC, a construction firm with extensive experience in restoration of wetlands, public parks, and educational facilities, was selected and notice to proceed was granted on June 12, 2007 a mere two days after the permit was issued.

Design Description:

With the help of our consultants, Landscape Architect Brian Powell and Associates, Geotechnical Engineers

Earthmax Technologies, our environmental planners Denise Duffy & Associates, our Marine Engineer, Farwest Engineering, our committee, and our reviewing agencies, a sophisticated plan had been designed encompassing several distinct components: Grassy playing field, tidal wetlands, seasonal wetlands, and public access path.

Grassy field: Under our final plan, the grassy playing field much larger, however, desiring to create more tidal and seasonal wetland, under the final design the field was reduced to 240 feet long by 110 feet wide, half of its original planned size, but still large enough to accommodate recess play as well as regulation soccer for players under 12.

Contaminated topsoil was removed from the existing playfield site, the area leveled and provided with drainage. Lastly, new topsoil was imported and carefully graded. The resulting field slopes gently towards the wetlands, taking rainwater away from the asphalt play yard and forming a natural “bioswale” or filter to cleanse water runoff before it enters the wetlands.

Tidal Wetland Expansion: Construction fill that had been dumped into the marsh from the development of the Strawberry Peninsula was removed, and the tidal wetlands were expanded with several new water channels that nearly doubled the amount of tidal water flow and pickle weed habitat to the area. In order to restore this area to its natural habitat, the wetlands were cleared of non-native and invasive plants and salt grass and pickle weed plantings introduced. Lastly, this wetland was permanently deeded to the public as a public space; thereby assuring its existence and protection in the future.

New Seasonal Wetland: At the south of the site, and bordering Harbor Point Way, a new protected seasonal wetland was created. This wetland will form a natural fresh water pond during the rainy season and encompass fresh water plants. Surrounded by a low fence and planting, it is a protected refuge for amphibians and birdlife.

Public Access Pathway: Lastly, a pathway has been created that links the strawberry and Mill Valley Community through the school and connects to the Bay Trail at Harbor Point Drive. With two handicapped accessible observation areas, four benches and two picnic tables, this path was a critical component for our community, educators, and our reviewing agencies, not only in terms of a public gesture, but also



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as a part of the bay education policy of BCDC. This pathway has been permanently deeded to the public by the Mill Valley School District and is now a part of the Bay Trail.

Field opening:

With experts in Construction like Hanford Arc on our team, construction proceeded smoothly and rough grading was completed in late September, well ahead of our winter deadline. Finally, in late October, our children and community were delighted to finally be able to witness the installation of sod on our new playing field. Final construction details are being completed, with our signage and seating being installed this spring. Our field opening is scheduled with a huge community party for Saturday March 8th!

While this Opening Day Celebration represents the end of the construction phase for our project, we expect the work



PTA Presidents Message Leslie Winokur & Steve Jaber

The day the sod was put down a few months ago was the day things changed for us at Strawberry Point School. That was when we went from being a school with a dream to one with a field -- and a school with an incredibly unique environmental education opportunity ahead of it, thanks to the adjacent wetlands preserve.

Who can forget seeing the faces of our children, pressed up against the construction site fence, looking at what for so long had been a neglected area of dirt and standing water finally transformed into a green oasis? There was something so magical about seeing it for the first time. Even the adults -- parents, teachers, staff and neighbors alike -- stopped to marvel at it.

For the Strawberry Point community, the field is now a reality. That in and of itself takes some getting used to, because it's been *seven years* in the making. **Seven years!!!** Let's stop to think about this for a minute. Just carrying out the PTA's day-to-day business is time consuming; doing things like signing up members; recruiting volunteers; overseeing room parents; fundraising; publishing a school newsletter; running a lunch program and serving hot meals every day to our children; organizing community building events; doing community outreach and community service; putting on an annual book fair; bringing in book authors; coordinating Emergency Preparedness; planning assemblies; taking care of hospitality for our meetings and for guests; selling Spiritwear and designing the yearbook. We list all of these ongoing responsibilities to drive home the point that all of these things take time, energy and lots of parent volunteers. (And we haven't even touched on all of the other things parents do, including volunteering time in the classrooms, library, art room and garden, and helping Kiddo!.)



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So it's all the more remarkable -- and frankly, almost beyond comprehension -- that the Strawberry Point PTA and Strawberry Point School community not only mobilized parents, children, teachers, staff, the Mill Valley School District and community members to get involved with the Field/Wetlands Restoration project in the first place, but also managed to keep it going for as long as it did and as long as it took -- *seven years* -- to get the job done!

And to put it simply, it is a testament to what people can do when they work together and never lose sight of their dream; and to people like the inspirational Tammy Edmonson, a former Strawberry Point PTA president and parent -- community organizer par excellence -- who tirelessly and selflessly led the charge, using her skills, talents and years of experience as a lawyer to help guide SPS through the *entire* process. (She is still involved, even though her daughter moved on to the Mill Valley Middle School last year!) And to the amazing Anne Forell Romero, an architect who took over from Tammy to oversee what we've come to call Phase II of this project -- the construction phase. Anne, too, has not only drawn on her professional skills and vision, to SPS's advantage, but has also sacrificed countless hours of personal time to make sure things are being done right. And to SPS principal, Leslie Thornton, who not only gave the project her complete backing and support, but has also been actively involved in bringing this project to fruition. Anyone who has had the pleasure of working with Leslie Thornton knows how fortunate we are to have a principal who truly values parent volunteers. We also need to give thanks to other active and dedicated SPS parents serving on the Field/Wetlands Restoration Committee, including civil engineer Victor Romero; architect Chip Smith; UC Berkeley Biology professor, Mike Moser; former PTA president, PTA fundraising head and management consultant Gwen Hubbard; former PTA president, sales and marketing professional and grant writer Amy Thomas and PTA Secretary, journalist and communications expert Jan Laret. Additionally, we as PTA co-presidents have also been involved in the committee's work.

Many thanks to the Schow family (whose children also moved on to the MVMS last year), for their continued and incredibly generous financial support over the years, and to everyone else in the Strawberry Point School and local community who has contributed time, money and donations to this project by participating in and supporting our fundraising efforts. A special thanks to Marcella and Eddie Savino, former SPS parents and local restaurateurs, who started, ran and contributed generously to Casino Night, our spring fundraiser, through which the Strawberry Point PTA raised hundreds of thousands of dollars -- *yes, hundreds of thousands of dollars!* -- over the years. (They are still supporting this year's Casino Night, renamed Auction Night, even though their children have graduated from SPS as well.) This year, we are fortunate to have the dynamic duo of parents Anton and Deb Schwarz, a sales and marketing executive and real estate broker/local businesswoman, respectively, running our annual spring fundraising event.

So here we are, for the first time in years, no longer having to ask for financial and other support to get the field finished. That part of our work is done. Our children will be running around and playing on it shortly.

Now we can turn our attention to the wetlands; on how to build upon the environmental education program we already have in place at our school by incorporating the wetlands into our curriculum. Thanks to PTA funding, we already have a dedicated, on-site naturalist in place, and we have parents, teachers, staff and community members eager to volunteer their time to make this field and wetlands preserve all that it can be. We have our garden, and the Richardson Bay out our back door, and now, the wetlands.

This sets us apart from all of the other elementary schools in Mill Valley. It is part of what will distinguish us and make us special going forward. But along with this exciting opportunity comes a new challenge; a responsibility to make sure we make good use of our environment while taking good care of it.

The best way to do this, we think, is by giving our children the tools -- educational and otherwise -- to rise to the challenge. The Strawberry Point PTA will continue to work hard to make sure our children get all that they need so they can learn how to become stewards of the land, and in turn, teach other children and adults in this community and the surrounding ones how to do this as well.



The Strawberry Point PTA will continue to work hard to make sure our children get all that they need so they can learn how to become stewards of the land

Principally Speaking *Leslie Thornton*

With the completion of the major construction over, and the gates coming down at the end of the month, an amazing dream will be realized. The staff and I are so excited about the opportunity to integrate the seasonal and tidal wetlands into our work in the garden and into our science curriculum. The possibilities are greatly expanded with our new walking paths and viewing areas. Our children can be involved in raising native plants in our garden greenhouse, and then planting them in the seasonal or tidal wetland. We are planning to add signage so that students and parents can readily identify the birds that visit our grounds. The number of birds has increased dramatically since we expanded the tidal wetlands. The fencing will allow students, families, and the public to view these amazing creatures, while at the same time protecting their habitat. The possibilities are endless. I look forward to sharing this magical spot with not just our own students, but students from other schools, as well as the larger community. Getting to this point has been an adventure. I cannot thank Tammy, Anne, our committee, our parent community, the Schow Foundation, Ken Benny, and the Board enough for their support. Everyone has so freely given of their time and resources. The children will be the recipients of all of this effort for many years to come. I am honored and humbled to be a part of this project and the work going forward. My heartfelt thank you to everyone involved, Leslie

Before



During



After



After

