



Success Story: Saving Breuner Marsh

Excerpted from:

Measuring What Matters: Neighborhood Research for Economic and Environmental Health and Justice in Richmond, North Richmond, and San Pablo



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In partnership with West County Toxics Coalition, Neighborhood House of North Richmond, Contra Costa Interfaith Supporting Community Organization, Historic Triangle Neighborhood Council, Morada de Mujeres del Milenio, North Richmond Shoreline Open Space Alliance, and Richmond Progressive Alliance

With support from The California Wellness Foundation, The San Francisco Foundation, East Bay Community Foundation, The Wallace Alexander Gerbode Foundation, Y & H Soda Foundation, Rose Foundation for Communities and the Environment, California Environmental Protection Agency, Firedoll Foundation, Robert & Patricia Switzer Foundation, and The California Endowment

The full report is available at http://www.pacinst.org/reports/measuring_what_matters/



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SAVING BREUNER MARSH:

A COMMUNITY SUCCESS STORY

by Amy Vanderwarker

Parchester Village, Richmond's northern-most neighborhood, is surrounded by Breuner Marsh, an ecological treasure which is one of the San Francisco Bay's last remaining tidal wetlands. Parchester residents have long recognized the marsh's value as natural open space, while developers have sought to build an airport, industry, and housing there. Protecting the marsh from development has taken years of concerted community efforts, but the recent campaign leading the Parks District to take over the marsh property may be the final victory ensuring the protection of Breuner Marsh.

Named for its original property owner, Breuner Marsh is a tranquil and beautiful rest area away from busy urban life. The colorful wetlands are habitat for abundant wildlife, hosting migratory water birds and endangered species such as the California Clapper Rail. The 238 acres of marsh function as water purifiers, flood control mechanisms, and prevent erosion along the shoreline.

Parchester Village was constructed in the 1940's as a subdivision inclusive of African-American families, many of whom migrated from the South to work in Richmond's shipyards during World War II. In an era

of overt housing discrimination, which relegated many African Americans to dilapidated housing, Parchester was an important victory organized by a network of churches and ministers. The ministers secured verbal promises from the housing developers that the neighboring marsh, later named Breuner, would remain open space for the enjoyment of residents.¹

Since then, Parchester residents have had to wage periodic battles to preserve the marsh and ensure their access to it, as have communities throughout the Bay area. Up to 95% of San Francisco Bay's tidal wetlands have been lost to development.² In the 1970's, residents fought off a proposal to build a small airport on the marsh. In 2000, the land was sold to a new owner who proposed to develop a complex of light industry on the marsh. By 2003, the plan had changed into a housing complex of over 1,000 units. The Parks District offered to buy the land, but the owners refused to sell.

Residents knew that development would irreversibly cut them off from the marsh and destroy the precious ecosystem. Other areas on the shoreline were being developed at a rapid rate, with subdivisions sprouting up along the Richmond Parkway.



Led by longtime residents and organizers such as Whitney Dotson, the community stepped up its organizing to stop the development. They were joined by research and advocacy groups including the Pacific Institute, Sierra Club, Save the Bay, Urban Creeks Council, Natural Heritage Institute, and the Environmental Justice Coalition for Water. Together they formed the North Richmond Shoreline Open Space Alliance (NRSOSA).

NRSOSA began gathering petition signatures to save the marsh and giving presentations on its historical, aesthetic, and environmental benefits. The group sponsored shoreline festivals in Point Pinole Park, organized walking tours, and held meetings with local decision makers to discuss alternate plans for Breuner Marsh.

Community-driven research played a key role in the campaign to save Breuner Marsh. In 2003, members of NRSOSA partnered with the Pacific Institute to design a series of trainings to build residents' research and advocacy skills. Participants in the training used a case study of a failed former development proposal for the Breuner Marsh to identify key players and political opportunities to influence local development decisions. They conducted a power analysis—a campaign planning tool that helps activists harness their knowledge of the local political landscape to develop effective strategies to achieve their goals. NRSOSA decided on a strategy for saving Breuner Marsh that centered on getting the Parks District to transform the area into a park.

To make their case for declaring the area a park, community members divided into groups to gather information on the area, such as which endangered species lived in the marsh and what the marsh meant to longtime community residents. The groups then used the information they collected to

develop advocacy materials, which included a slide show presentation, a letter of introduction, and a fact sheet on the Breuner Marsh campaign.

After vigorous research and advocacy by these community leaders, the Parks District initiated eminent domain proceedings to acquire the Breuner Marsh property. Eminent domain allows a public agency to seize private land for the public good, providing market-rate compensation for the landowners. Despite the City of Richmond's opposition, the Parks District successfully concluded the legal proceedings to acquire the marsh in 2008.

Today, NRSOSA is working toward establishing a corridor of open space along the North Richmond Shoreline, preserving West Contra Costa County's incredible natural amenities and advancing sustainable, community-based development. They are also pushing for increased community access to the shoreline, recognizing that barriers such as the Richmond Parkway and the railway tracks prevent many residents from fully enjoying the open space in their backyard. Voters recognized the leadership of Whitney Dotson in November 2008, by electing him to the Board of Directors of the East Bay Regional Parks.



Amy Vanderwarker became involved in the struggle to save the North Richmond shoreline through her work as the Outreach Manager at the Environmental Justice Coalition for Water. She has worked on various social and environmental justice issues in California for the past ten years and now works as a consultant in Oakland, CA.

Endnotes

- 1 Personal communication, Whitney Dotson, August, 2008.
- 2 San Francisco Estuary Project. (1999). *San Francisco Bay-Delta Estuary*. San Francisco, CA: San Francisco Estuary Project.