

COMPASS

FALL 2026



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BLAZING A NEW TRAIL

**A bold strategy propels the Foundation
into a new era of impact**

MOVING FORWARD WITH PURPOSE

We are building on the successes of the past 57 years to embark on an exciting new chapter for the Regional Parks Foundation, expanding our impact on the East Bay Regional Parks and our community with an ambitious strategy for the future.

In March, the Foundation adopted a new five-year strategic plan that strengthens our role as the philanthropic partner of the East Bay Regional Park District. Through this plan, we will continue to expand fundraising efforts to protect and preserve our parks,

champion access for all, and connect the East Bay's diverse communities to nature.

Our new strategic direction positions the Foundation as a 57-year-old startup—one with the experience and stability of a legacy institution, and the creativity, flexibility, and innovative spirit of a new organization. Over the past two years, our board of directors approached the strategic planning process with great care and intention, and I am so appreciative of their hard work and dedication. Explore our vision for the Foundation's future on page 6.

In August, the Park District appointed Max Korten general manager—a major milestone after serving nearly two years as deputy general manager and acting general manager. Max brings more than two decades of experience with organizations like Marin County Parks and Conservation Corps North Bay. He is a strong leader with a heartfelt dedication to East Bay Parks and the vibrant communities they serve. His priorities include addressing wildfire risk, expanding habitat restoration, advancing vegetation management, and opening several new parks in the years ahead. Learn more about Max and his plans for the Park District on page 12.

Thank you for your support of the Regional Parks Foundation. We look forward to blazing this new trail with you.

Lauren Bernstein

Lauren Bernstein
Executive Director
Regional Parks Foundation

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EAST BAY REGIONAL PARK DISTRICT

BOARD PRESIDENT 2026
Olivia Sanwong

GENERAL MANAGER

Max Korten

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Did You Know?

Fun facts about the Regional Parks Foundation

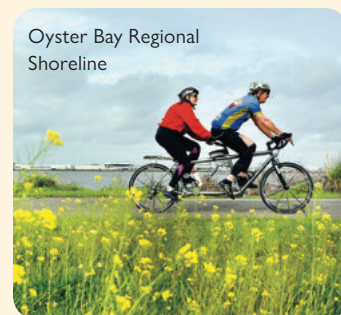


8,175

students certified in CPR, first aid, or hands-only CPR in 2025 through Foundation-supported programs

28,807

miles logged by 829 parkgoers during the 2025 Trails Challenge



667

acres in the East Bay hills protected through the Park District's Fuels Reduction Project

86%

year-over-year increase in All Abilities Day attendance in 2025



A FOUNDATION BUILT TO LAST

Board President Holly Potter's leadership and vision are helping guide the Foundation into its next chapter



Left: Holly Potter is in her third term as president of the Regional Parks Foundation board of directors. **Right:** Potter (third from left) at a Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation Service Day event in the parks.

Holly Potter grew up in the East Bay and returned to raise her children here, drawn by the region's open spaces and access to nature.

Now in her third term as president of the Regional Parks Foundation board of directors, Potter also serves as chief communications officer for the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation, a nonprofit focused on advancing scientific discovery and environmental conservation. For Potter, the parks aren't just public spaces—they're part of what makes the region special.

"Everyone on the board has memories and stories of time spent in our wonderful parks," Potter says. "Protecting them and welcoming the next generation of park visitors is what motivates me and so many others."

She joined the Foundation board in 2019 after serving as chair of the Bay Area Open Space Council during its transition to TOGETHER Bay Area. "I'm apparently drawn to helping boards navigate transitions," says Potter.

Over the past three years, she has helped lead the Foundation through a comprehensive strategic planning process (see page 6) and prepare it for its next phase.

"Under Holly's leadership as board chair, we are entering an exciting 'glow-up'—new energy, new vision, and a fresh chapter taking shape," says Foundation Executive Director Lauren Bernstein. "Her steady hand and bold thinking are setting us up for years of growth ahead. We're so grateful for her service."

"We are fortunate to be building on an organization with more than 57 years of

history and see tremendous opportunities for growth," Potter says. "The East Bay Regional Parks are the crown jewel of the region and the Foundation is poised to be the philanthropic partner our park system deserves."

Potter is in her final year as board president, though she will continue serving as a board member. She says working alongside her fellow board members has been one of the most rewarding parts of her time with the Foundation. "I have seen all the board members step up with different types of expertise throughout this transformative period, helping envision the next chapter for the organization," she adds.

In this next phase, one of her top priorities is finding new ways to connect East Bay residents with the Regional Parks.

"The Foundation exists to support and strengthen our parks, forever," says Potter. "We want the people of the East Bay to be just as passionate about and connected to these vital natural resources as we are."

Connected to the Outdoors

The Foundation also recognized longtime board member John Martin in 2026 for his nine years of service. The CEO of Drake's Brewing Co. in San Leandro grew up in Orinda and Berkeley, where he says, "Tilden and the East Bay hills were the center of my outdoor recreational universe."

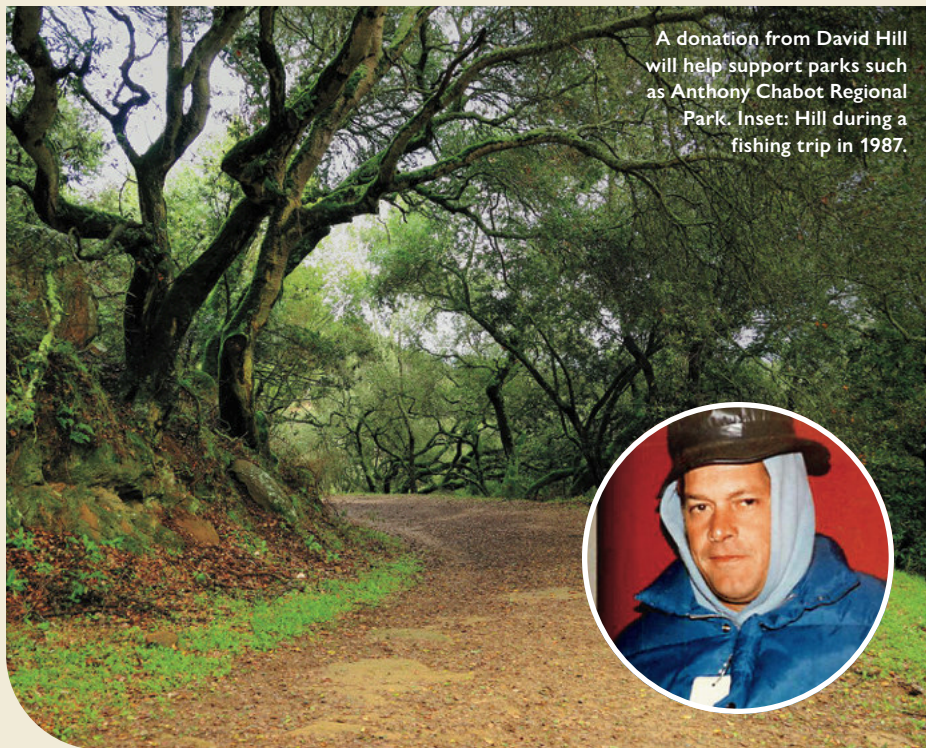


John Martin (left) marks the Foundation's 55th anniversary at Lakeside Laps: Run for Regional Parks event in 2024.



ROOTED IN NATURE

David Hill's generous bequest will help preserve and enhance the Regional Parks he loved



A donation from David Hill will help support parks such as Anthony Chabot Regional Park. Inset: Hill during a fishing trip in 1987.

David Hill's love of the outdoors began early and remained central to his life. Born in 1940, he grew up in Oakland, where the East Bay's hills and parks sparked a fascination with the natural world. Curious and enterprising, he spent his youth exploring those landscapes and developing a lifelong connection to nature.

Hill honored that connection by including the Regional Parks Foundation in his estate plan with a \$1.34 million bequest. He passed away in 2025, but his gift will help ensure the future of the East Bay trails that shaped his life.

"David's bequest reflects his connection to the Regional Parks and will help maintain existing trails and create new ones for future park visitors to enjoy," says Lauren Bernstein, executive director of the Regional Parks Foundation. "His gift will also strengthen volunteer efforts throughout the Park District. It is a fitting legacy for David, who spent countless hours hiking in the East Bay."

An elevator repair technician, Hill was an avid fisherman in his off hours. He loved the ocean and took fishing trips to Alaska and Baja.

At home, he brought that same dedication to his garden, transforming a wooded hillside into a productive plot filled with fruits, vegetables, and other plants.

His compassion also extended to animals. Friends and neighbors knew him as someone who readily cared for animals in need, whether taking in a stray cat or leaving food for local wildlife.

Guided by a respect for the environment and a spirit of adventure, Hill inspired those around him to share his passion for the outdoors.

Robin Cowley, Hill's sister, would occasionally join him on the trails. "He and I were walking a trail once, when he said, 'Everyone should be out here walking the trails; there's so much to see. Even if you don't know the names of the plants, it's still fun to see everything,'" she recalls.



➤ The Regional Parks Foundation offers an estate planning program for those interested in leaving a bequest or gift to support environmental protection, park access, youth programming, and stronger connections to nature in the East Bay. Visit regionalparksfoundation.org for more information about ways you can make a difference in our region, including details about free estate planning seminars held throughout the year.

“David's bequest reflects his connection to the Regional Parks and will help maintain existing trails and create new ones for future park visitors to enjoy. It is a fitting legacy for David, who spent countless hours hiking in the East Bay.”

— LAUREN BERNSTEIN



Steve and Cheryl Nevares are devoted Foundation supporters.

The Nevares often hike in Briones Regional Park.



FOREVER COMMITTED TO THE PARKS

After decades of enjoying the parks with their family, Steve and Cheryl Nevares are helping ensure other East Bay residents have the same opportunity

Longtime Orinda residents and Regional Parks Foundation members Steve and Cheryl Nevares share a lasting passion for supporting their beloved green spaces and ensuring access to nature for all.

Both retired landscape architects, Steve and Cheryl have supported the Foundation at the Family Member level for about a decade and recently made a substantial donation to the Foundation. “We have the capability to give more now, and it is important for us to support the Park District’s educational programs and opportunities for kids who might not otherwise be able to go on a camping trip or enjoy other aspects of nature,” says Cheryl. “Those things mean a lot to Steve and me.”

The couple visits the Park District at least five days a week, taking their 11-year-old Rottweiler-German shepherd mix, Ben, for walks in Briones Regional Park. Steve is also an avid mountain biker who rides his e-bike in Briones, Tilden Regional Park, and Diablo Foothills Regional Park.

“I’m getting to the point where I don’t ride singletrack anymore, so it’s nice having the fire roads and seeing all of the scenery,” says Steve. “I enjoy the quiet. And while I try to avoid the weekends, even if the parks are busy, there are enough different trails that you’re not running into people all the time.”

Cheryl also loves the seasonal attractions at Briones, from spring wildflowers to fall foliage. “These parks are such treasures—they are just unbelievable,” she says.

The District’s shoreline parks are other favorite destinations, particularly Point Pinole Regional Shoreline and Miller/Knox Regional Shoreline. The

couple appreciates the interpretive displays highlighting local history, as well as opportunities to observe wildlife.

Steve and Cheryl’s two sons grew up in the parks, frequenting Tilden’s steam train, carousel, and Little Farm. As high school students, they also worked at Tilden Park Golf Course.

The value of their family’s regular experiences in nature was driven home for Steve recently. He volunteers as a court-appointed special advocate helping foster youth and was taking a teenager on an outing to Dr. Aurelia Reinhardt Redwood Regional Park.

“He was totally blown away by the redwoods. In fact, he took a friend back out there the next week,” Steve recalls.

Those eye-opening moments are part of the reason the couple says they will remain dedicated Foundation members.

“We’re so deeply thankful to the Foundation and the Park District for their stewardship efforts and for providing opportunities for the community to enjoy programs in nature,” says Cheryl. “There’s just no substitute for these experiences.”



➤ To learn more about membership or other ways to support East Bay Regional Parks, visit regionalparksfoundation.org/join.

AFTER OFF

**THE REGIONAL PARKS FOUNDATION
IS CHARTING ITS FUTURE THROUGH A
BOLD NEW STRATEGIC PLAN >>**

EARTH RESH AIR

For more than 57 years, the Regional Parks Foundation has connected people with nature, supported land stewardship and conservation, and strengthened the East Bay Regional Park District's system of 73 parks.

Now, the Foundation is undergoing its most significant transformation since its founding in 1969.

A strategic plan adopted in March will allow the Foundation to make investments in East Bay Regional Parks that are truly transformational. The strategic pillars outlined in the plan will bolster the Foundation's ability to raise funds, welcome more communities into the parks, and help the Park District meet challenges ranging from climate resilience to developing new parklands.

"This is such an exciting and pivotal moment for the Foundation," says Executive Director Lauren Bernstein. "We're building on the success of the past 57 years while taking an innovative approach to expanding our impact. At a moment when spending time in nature is more important than ever, we're strengthening our capacity to support the parks and the people who love them."

The planning process began in 2024 and involved Foundation board members, Park District leadership and staff, community partners, donors, and consultants from the Potrero Group. The strategic plan adopts a mission centered on philanthropy and community engagement while enhancing operational effectiveness and remaining closely aligned with the highest priorities of the Park District.

"This plan was brought together with love and intention," says board member Terrence Riley, who served on the strategic planning

working group. "It is defining the Foundation as a community-centered organization that is here for access and service to all."

Developing a traditional nonprofit operating model provides the Foundation with added opportunities to fundraise and address priorities with greater flexibility and creativity. "If you are a nonprofit embedded within a public entity, you are beholden to the public entity's processes," says Foundation Board President Holly Potter. "Separating these operations allows the Foundation to be more responsive and supportive of the Park District over the long term."

Park District General Manager Max Korten says the step will benefit both the Park District and the Foundation. "The shift allows the Foundation to invest in the highest-priority projects for the Park District, such as reducing wildfire fuels, improving trails, and acquiring and opening new park facilities. We're excited about the opportunities to advance those projects together."

The Foundation's next phase comes at an important juncture as the Park District continues to grow while property tax revenue has slowed. Several new parks are expected in the coming years, including a potential shoreline park at the former site of Golden Gate Fields (see page 11 for more details). The Park District also faces increased demands for wildfire preparedness, trail improvements, shoreline adaptation, and major capital projects.

"As we bring more parkland online, our responsibility to protect and preserve it also grows. That means more trails to maintain, more habitats to steward, and more communities to serve," says Allison Brooks, assistant general manager of external affairs for the Park District. "We'll need to generate additional resources in the years ahead, and this is where having an independent but aligned partner will be critical."

According to Korten, the Foundation can help the Park District respond more quickly than traditional government funding processes often allow. One recent example involved vegetation





Foundation funding assists interpretive programming in the Park District.

management planning, where Foundation support allowed the Park District to rapidly map priority wildfire fuel-reduction areas. “The Foundation’s investment could mean leveraging many millions of state dollars for fuels reduction work,” says Korten.

»» DEFINING THE MISSION AND CORE VALUES

Developing the strategic plan gave the Foundation a chance to reexamine its mission and core values. Board members gathered for a retreat in 2025 and discussed what they hoped to accomplish as an organization.

At the heart of the Foundation’s work is ensuring access for all, especially historically marginalized communities—a value that is particularly meaningful for Riley. “Championing access is a big part of why I joined the board,” he says. “Being a kid from the inner city of San Francisco who was close to so many beautiful parks while growing up and didn’t even know they were there is something I regret. I want to make sure everyone knows that they have these beautiful East Bay Regional Parks to enjoy.”

Other established core values include putting nature first, building trusted relationships, and staying flexible and creative. The plan also resulted in a newly articulated mission statement: “The Regional Parks Foundation builds strong community support for East Bay Regional Parks for the enjoyment of all, forever.”

“It was an opportunity for the board to say not just what they do, but why it matters,” says Stephanie Karp, managing director of the Potrero Group, who helped lead the planning process.

Efforts around conservation, vegetation management, and trail maintenance and expansion are focuses for both the Foundation and the Park District. “We have a real need to invest in our trail



Recent restoration and public access projects at Coyote Hills Regional Park enhance the space for visitors and wildlife.

GREEN TEAM

THE FOUNDATION’S NEWEST STAFF MEMBERS SHARE THEIR DEDICATION TO THE REGIONAL PARKS

“ I JOINED THE REGIONAL PARKS FOUNDATION AS DIRECTOR OF ADVANCEMENT FOLLOWING A 15-YEAR FUNDRAISING CAREER IN THE ARTS.



I JOINED THE FOUNDATION BECAUSE OUR EAST BAY REGIONAL PARKS ARE FUNDAMENTAL TO OUR COMMUNITY’S WELL-BEING, AND I BELIEVE THEY ARE WORTHY OF PROTECTION AND STRONG PHILANTHROPIC SUPPORT. IT’S A DREAM JOB.”

— ARI LIPSKY, DIRECTOR OF ADVANCEMENT

“ AFTER MORE THAN A DECADE WORKING WITH NONPROFITS AND PHILANTHROPIES, I AM HONORED TO SUPPORT THE REGIONAL PARKS FOUNDATION’S EFFORTS TO CONNECT MORE EAST BAY



RESIDENTS WITH THEIR PARKS, ADVANCE ENVIRONMENTAL STEWARDSHIP, AND INSPIRE THE NEXT GENERATION OF SCIENTISTS, CONSERVATIONISTS, AND PARKGOERS.

I CAN’T IMAGINE A MORE EXCITING TIME TO JOIN THIS TALENTED AND PASSIONATE TEAM.”

— CYRUS MARTIN, COMMUNICATIONS MANAGER

“ I JOINED THE REGIONAL PARKS FOUNDATION TO CONTINUE MY CAREER SPANNING CONSERVATION, SCIENCE, AND THE ARTS. AS AN EAST BAY RESIDENT AND PARENT, THE PARKS ARE PART OF MY FAMILY’S LIFE, AND I WAS EXCITED BY THE OPPORTUNITY TO BRING MY EXPERIENCE TO WORK THAT PROTECTS THESE SPECIAL PLACES AND HELPS THEM THRIVE.”



— LIZ RODDY, EXECUTIVE SUPPORT COORDINATOR

{ A BREATH OF FRESH AIR }

network. We have over 1,000 miles of existing trails, and many of them need work to reduce impacts on the land and improve access for visitors,” says Korten.

“Fuels reduction and vegetation management are also key priorities to keep our communities safe,” he adds. “We also need to make investments in our shoreline parks to make sure that people can continue to enjoy these amazing spaces as they are being impacted by rising sea levels.”

Riley says building trusted relationships means bringing together like-minded organizations and individuals, while strengthening the Foundation’s longtime membership base. Recent efforts include doubling the number of grants awarded to community-based organizations such as La Clínica de La Raza and Oakland Goes Outdoors through the Park District’s Community Engagement Grant Pilot Program (see page 17 for more).

“I don’t think we look at ourselves as a fundraising organization first and foremost, even though we are,” Riley says. “We are an organization that wants to partner with our parks and our community and make sure that we’re serving them well. Once people experience all the parks have to offer, they will keep coming back and feel a sense of ownership of these spaces.”

Potter adds, “We want the people of the East Bay to be passionate and connected to our natural resources, and we hope to create new champions and advocates for the parks.”

Karp says the Foundation’s dedicated membership has been instrumental in its past successes and will remain central to its future. “I just want members to know how valued they are and how much they’ve contributed to helping build the Foundation into the organization it is today.”

The final core value is staying flexible and creative to more effectively advocate for East Bay Parks and the people who visit them. Such efforts include embracing new fundraising ideas and evolving strategies to bring new visitors into the parks.

“There are so many opportunities to serve the Park District as best we can, including conservation, restoration, and capital campaigns,” adds Riley. “We know we need to be adaptable in order to do that.”



The 9,090-acre Pleasanton Ridge Regional Park is one of many scenic parks offering recreational opportunities.



The Foundation supports aquatic safety instruction and the purchase of rescue equipment.

» IN THE FOREVER BUSINESS

The five-year strategic plan is built around three pillars that support the Foundation’s mission.

The first pillar focuses on increasing fundraising capacity by investing in systems and Foundation staff. The second involves welcoming new park visitors through refreshed branding and marketing to broaden public awareness. The third pillar centers on expanding the Foundation’s impact through investments in Park District programs, community initiatives, and regional conservation efforts, including ongoing collaborations with the East Bay Stewardship Network.

“We want to ensure our parks are welcoming and that programming is well-matched with what our communities are looking for,” says Brooks. “Our community-based partners are helping us meet people where they are and introducing them to all the Park District has to offer.”

There are numerous health benefits associated with spending time outdoors, including decreased stress, lower blood pressure, and stronger immune systems. Bringing more visitors into the parks helps the overall well-being of East Bay residents.

“Ensuring access for future generations is central to the Foundation’s mission, and we feel honored to work alongside our community to create more opportunities for people to experience, enjoy, and care for these parks,” says Bernstein. “I’m deeply grateful for our board’s thoughtfulness and foresight in preparing the Foundation to help grow our parks and broaden outdoor access for the communities they serve.”

Ultimately, success won’t be measured only by dollars raised, but by stronger partnerships and deeper engagement between East Bay communities and their Regional Parks. As Karp puts it, “What’s wonderful about park systems is that they are in the forever business.”



➤ Explore the full strategic plan at regionalparksfoundation.org/strategic-plan.

GOLDEN OPPORTUNITY

A NEW WATERFRONT PARK WOULD CONNECT LOCAL COMMUNITIES WITH THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY

When news broke this past spring of a potential East Bay Regional Park at the former Golden Gate Fields racetrack, neighboring residents responded with an outpouring of enthusiasm. The 161-acre property, vacant since the racetrack closed in 2024, represents something increasingly rare in the Bay Area: a large, undeveloped stretch of waterfront with the potential to become a public space where everyone feels at home.

For generations, the area has been shaped by industry and development, leaving many communities in Albany, Berkeley, and Oakland with limited access to the shoreline. The possibility of transforming the property into an accessible park could change that and reconnect people with the San Francisco Bay.

The national conservation group Trust for Public Land (TPL) is working with the Park District, the Regional Parks Foundation, community partners, Bay Area nonprofits, the state of California, and others to protect

the property from private development. The vision is ambitious: restore wetlands, preserve wildlife habitat, and create a world-class recreation destination that could improve health, climate resilience, and quality of life for communities throughout the region.

“This is our Crissy Fields moment—the opportunity underscores the essential role of the Foundation as a key Park District partner—raising funds to help fulfill this vision for a revitalized East Bay shoreline,” says Foundation Executive Director Lauren Bernstein. “This shoreline park will provide a community space where residents of Contra Costa and Alameda counties can cool off in the summer heat, come together, and take advantage of all that our beautiful shoreline has to offer.”

The state of California, the governor’s office, and TPL have secured \$125 million in public funding toward the purchase, with plans to transfer ownership to the

Park District. An additional \$50 million is needed to complete the acquisition and prepare the property. Over the next 18 to 24 months, the Foundation aims to raise up to \$2.5 million for park planning, design, and construction, while also serving as the long-term philanthropic partner for the Golden Gate Fields project.

“Golden Gate Fields is an exciting potential acquisition for the Park District—one with a great deal of public interest and importance for our region,” says Park District General Manager Max Korten. “The Foundation is a strong partner in future efforts to plan the park and activate the area.”



➤ To contribute to the Regional Parks Foundation’s efforts in support of the proposed park, visit regionalparksfoundation.org/golden-gate-fields.

The potential acquisition of land at the former Golden Gate Fields site would close gaps in the interconnected system of shoreline parks, including McLaughlin Eastshore State Park.

NATURAL LEADER

Park District General Manager Max Korten on stewarding the East Bay Regional Parks for the next generation



Leading one of the nation's largest regional parks systems is not a responsibility he takes lightly. "These parks mean so much to the East Bay. I feel very fortunate to be part of such a strong organization," he says. Here, he shares his vision for the Park District and his commitment to preserving and protecting the parks for years to come.

Max Korten has come a long way since hosting campfire talks

as a young park ranger for the U.S. Forest Service 27 years ago. In August, the East Bay Regional Park District board of directors approved his appointment as general manager, a role he had held in an acting capacity since late 2025. Before joining the Park District in 2024, Korten served as director and general manager of Marin County Parks.

» How did you become interested in natural resources?

In my freshman year at UC Santa Cruz, someone came to talk about the Student Conservation Association, a conservation corps group. I applied and got a call from the Forest Service in the Eastern Sierra, asking if I wanted to work up there as a ranger for the summer. I did it on a whim, but it was amazing. I changed all of my classes to environmental studies. I'd originally wanted to study music, but after that summer, I knew this was what I wanted to do.

» Are there parks that hold special meaning for you?

I grew up in Inglewood, near Los Angeles, and used to go to Kenneth Hahn State Recreation Area in the Baldwin Hills. It reminds me of some of our parks—surrounded by a pretty urban area. It was a cool place to go with friends and be outdoors.

Before coming to the Park District, I worked for about 10 years in Marin County Parks, but I lived in Oakland and Berkeley. As my son grew up, we took him to Tilden Regional Park often, hiking and going to the Little Farm. All of the Regional Parks are very special to me, my family, and our lives.

» What are your top priorities as general manager?

We want to steward the natural and financial resources to take care of the Regional Parks for the future. In the near term, we are working on our District Plan, which will guide us over the coming years—including vegetation and fuels management, trails management, and capital project prioritization.

This is an exciting time. We are opening many new facilities in the next few years. Projects such as the Tidewater Day Use Area, funded in part by the Regional Parks Foundation, will be an exciting addition, along with expanding Doolan Canyon in the Livermore-Dublin area. Other new parks include Deer Valley Regional Park in Antioch and Thurgood Marshall Regional Park in Concord. There are also parks in the acquisition and planning stages, such as Point Molate. Golden Gate Fields is a huge opportunity as well.

» How important is equity in nature?

Our East Bay communities have historically been redlined, and parks have felt inaccessible to some of our residents. We want to work proactively to increase equity and reduce disparities in the parks. One of the most important parts of our work is connecting with the communities we serve and increasing diversity and representation on our Park District team. Parks are an integral part of quality of life, and that should be true for everyone. I want people to feel welcome in the Regional Parks and know these spaces are for them.

Spending time in nature is so important to health and happiness. For me, a hike or bike ride in the parks helps peel off the stress of the day. I've been jogging and hiking at Miller/Knox Regional Shoreline in Richmond lately, and it's such a great place; even at 8 p.m., the park is full of people connecting with nature in a hundred different ways.

Parks can be a place to walk alone or a spot for a huge family picnic, where you can connect with groups of people who'd



Top: Max Korten (far left) with the Park District Fuels Crew.

Right: Korten (far right), State Senator Jerry McNerney, and a Civicorps Trails Crew at Pleasanton Ridge Regional Park.



never fit in your house. They are places to fish, learn to swim, ride a bike, or challenge yourself and have some fun.

» What have been some of your notable successes?

When I started as acting general manager about 10 months ago, we faced some significant challenges, including adopting a budget and supporting a staff reorganization. It was a challenging time for the Park District, and I'm proud of how our team and board worked together to build trust and reach compromise—moving the Park District forward in a positive way.

Partnering with the Foundation and supporting the development of its strategic plan has also been exciting.

» How does the Foundation partnership support growth?

One of the things I loved about my job in Marin was our partnership with the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy through One Tam. It showed me the power of a strong nonprofit park partner. Now, working with [Foundation Executive Director]

Lauren Bernstein and the Foundation board, I'm excited about the strategic plan. The goal is to help the Foundation support the major growth the Park District envisions over the next five to 10 years. When I talk to partners about Golden Gate Fields, for example, they ask how we can fundraise for a project like this. It is both a challenge and an opportunity to work together to support an amazing potential project for the community.

We are working together on long-term support for the Park District and our Regional Parks.

» What are your favorite ways to spend a day outdoors?

Pretty much anything my son wants to do. He likes hiking, so we have regular spots we frequent. Tilden is closest to my home, and I have been enjoying Miller/Knox; the view from the hills is amazing at sunset. This role has let me explore more. I hiked up to Mission Peak for the first time a couple of weeks ago and was amazed at how people pushed themselves there. It's been great to get a wider view of the Park District.



Ticket to Ride

The Park District's transportation program introduces thousands of students to nature every year

One participant in the Park District's Teen Eco Action program had been quiet all week, giving little indication of what he was thinking during the nature-focused summer camp. Then, after five days of exploring multiple East Bay Regional Parks, he stood on the shoreline at Crown Memorial State Beach and turned to transportation program supervisor Ilana Peterson with a broad smile.

The experience had been amazing, he told her. He wanted to know how to return on his own, where he could hike, and whether he needed any special gear.

"He just lit up," Peterson recalls. "He wanted to come back."

For Peterson, the encounter was proof that a first visit could spark a lifelong relationship with the parks—an opportunity that should be open to all. "We want to promote equitable access to parks by reducing transportation barriers," she says.



Transportation program supervisor Ilana Peterson helps coordinate the many logistics that go into school and community outings.



Kids help plant trees at Cull Canyon Regional Recreation Area.

The transportation program serves eligible public schools, special education classes, nonprofits, and government agencies in Alameda and Contra Costa counties, with a focus on communities that have historically faced barriers to park access.

Support from the Regional Parks Foundation more than doubles the transportation program's capacity, Peterson says. In 2025 alone, the program coordinated 691 bus trips—transporting more than 31,000 students, teachers, and community members to parks throughout the East Bay. The program served 140 schools and scores of nonprofit and municipal organizations.

Buses for a single day trip can cost anywhere from \$700 to \$2,000, depending on distance, timing, and other factors. While public schools in Alameda and Contra Costa counties pay no fees for Park District education programs, many schools, particularly those serving lower-income communities, can't afford transportation—making it impossible for students to visit.

"Transportation is really essential," says Peterson. "The parks and the programs are there, but if people aren't able to reach them, they're not getting their dose of nature medicine."

The effects of these experiences often extend well beyond a day outdoors.

According to Sandi Funke, division lead for Interpretive and Recreation Services, research consistently shows that spending time in nature produces immediate physical and emotional benefits for young people.

"From the moment a child steps onto a trail, into an oak woodland, or even just onto the grass at one of our East Bay Regional Parks, something meaningful begins to happen," Funke says.

Time spent outdoors helps children reduce stress, improve focus, build confidence, and strengthen problem-solving skills and teamwork. Just as important

By the Numbers

691

bus trips coordinated in 2025
through the transportation
program

31,777

students, teachers,
and community members
served by free bus
transportation to park
programs

140

schools, along with dozens
of nonprofits and municipal
organizations, served through
the transportation program
in 2025



Naturalists lead an
Earth Day walk at Sunol
Wilderness Regional
Preserve.



The Mobile Fish Exhibit
brings outdoor education
directly to students.

is the lasting connection to nature these experiences foster—inspiring future conservationists, scientists, park advocates, and volunteers.

“Parks are more than places to play,” Funke adds. “They are places that shape people.”

Peterson has seen that impact firsthand. She recently spoke with a teacher whose special education class hadn’t taken a field trip in more than 10 years, as transportation costs and the need for wheelchair-accessible buses made such outings impossible. The teacher told Peterson that many of her students had never left Oakland to experience nature. Thanks to the transportation program, the class finally made it to the parks.

Another teacher from Burbank Elementary School in Hayward expressed her appreciation on behalf of her

first-grade class: “The ultimate goal was to get our students top-notch, hands-on learning experiences. Without your vital assistance, we would have paid a cost that would have been a big hardship for my colleagues and our students.”

Stories like these underscore the importance of the program.

Teachers already juggle tight budgets, limited resources, and countless responsibilities. Peterson says her team’s goal is to remove as many challenges as possible. Behind the scenes, a staff of three coordinates hundreds of bus trips each year, working with schools and bus contractors so educators can focus on helping students

enjoy the parks instead of worrying about getting them there.

“We try to lift as many hurdles as we can for teachers,” Peterson says.

Transportation also supports longer-term programs, including Teen Eco Action, Adventure Crew, Park Prescriptions, and the Community Outreach Outdoor Program—introducing young people to hiking, kayaking, fishing, camping, and stewardship while helping them build confidence to return on their own.

Every bus trip represents more than a ride to the park. “We want to build the next generation of environmental stewards,” Peterson adds. “Getting outside and having that moment in nature can help plant the seed and change someone’s trajectory.”



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LOVE IN THE PARKS

Anne Rockwell and Stephen Gehrett built a happy life together after meeting as Park District employees



Anne Rockwell, Stephen Gehrett, and their five grandchildren.

Digging ditches and paving roads made for an unlikely start to a romance for Anne Rockwell and Stephen Gehrett.

The pair met while working for the Park District. After stints as a lifeguard at Contra Loma Regional Park in Antioch and a park ranger at Crown Memorial State Beach in Alameda, Rockwell joined the Roads and Trails crew under Gehrett's supervision in 1981.

Post-work gatherings led to dating. "We'd go down to the Kingfisher and make goo-goo eyes at each other," recalls Rockwell, although they initially tried to keep their relationship under wraps.

"Socializing after hours was a big part of how we got to know each other," adds Gehrett. "At work, I was the boss, and she had to do the hard stuff: asphalt work, installing big pipes, building trails."

"We were a human resources department nightmare," says Rockwell with a laugh. She eventually transferred to another division at Tilden Regional Park.

The pair married in 1985 at Saint Clement's Episcopal Church in Berkeley. "We had 100 guests at the wedding, and outside of family members, more than half of the people there were from the Park District," Rockwell recalls.

They had two children, both of whom

worked at the Park District at one time or another. Their son, Courtney, was a student laborer and later a gate attendant at Lake Temescal, while their daughter, Morgan, worked at Lake Anza in Tilden. The family frequently went camping and explored state and national parks—often checking out facility operations, much to the kids' chagrin.

In 1991, Rockwell and Gehrett worked on the same crew fighting the Oakland Firestorm—the largest wildland-urban interface fire in Bay Area history. "Stephen drove a water tender, so while we weren't fighting the fire together I knew where he was, so I never had to worry," says Rockwell.

Less dramatic memories of their time with the Park District include annual staff golf tournaments that Gehrett hosted for 20 years, followed by large barbecues for the employees and their families. The pair also left a permanent mark on the landscape with Rockwell planting more than 200 trees and Gehrett taking part in numerous design and construction projects during his decades on the job.

"Even now, when I walk in the parks I can see the work I did," he reflects. "That's something incredibly cool for both of us."

Gehrett retired in 2010, Rockwell in 2013, but they still cherish their former colleagues and spending time in the parks. Rockwell volunteers with the Park District archives and regularly hikes with other retirees. They also participate in the Trails Challenge each year.

"We met in the Park District, collaborated on so many projects, and still share our love for parks," adds Gehrett. "The Park District continues to grow, and that's really a joy to see."



investment in community relationships and in being a good partner to community organizations that share the goal of connecting people to nature and the benefits of parks and the outdoors.”

By partnering with these organizations, the Park District is creating new pathways into the parks and more environmental education opportunities while respecting the important role these groups already play in their communities.

“The mission of the program is to test new ways of engaging with community-based organizations and build stronger relationships with the people they serve,” says Jennifer Chong, a management analyst in the Office of Equity who helped develop the initiative. “We want to strengthen our relationships with communities that have historically had limited engagement with our programs and resources.”

In addition to Growing Together, Disabled Hikers, and PAAACT, inaugural grant recipients include Acta Non Verba, BORP Adaptive Sports and Recreation, Brotherhood of Elders Network, East Oakland Neighborhoods Initiative, Family Bridges, La Clínica de La Raza, Latino Outdoors, Monument Crisis Center, Muwekma Ohlone Preservation Foundation, Oakland Goes Outdoors, Rich City Rays, TransCamp, and the Vietnamese American Community Center of the East Bay.

“The Park District wants to be a valuable resource for communities throughout the East Bay,” says Chong. “To do that, people need to know who we are, where we are, and how our parks can benefit them. This is a new way to reach more residents and help ensure they know these parks are here for everyone.”



PAAACT's students participating in classes at Big Break Regional Shoreline.

NATURE FOR EVERYONE

A new grant program is helping more East Bay communities engage with the outdoors

A program teaching fourth graders about native plants through the green schoolyard nonprofit Growing Together. Group events and trail guides for people of all abilities organized by Disabled Hikers. Nature-based classes hosted by Parental African American Achievement Collaborative Team (PAAACT). These are just a few of the initiatives funded by the East Bay Regional Park District's new Community Engagement Grant Pilot Program, which invests in community-based organizations, or CBOs.

Launched in fall 2025 through the Park District's Office of Equity, the pilot program awarded grants to 16 nonprofit organizations. Recipients each received between \$7,000 and \$20,000 to support programs in three categories: Explore the Outdoors, Nature in the Neighborhood, and Civic Engagement.

Support from the Regional Parks Foundation doubled the program's original funding, thanks to a gift from the Kathryn and Robert Riddell Fund at the East Bay Community Foundation.

“Community organizations often have their own curriculum and programs, they

just need funding for transportation to get to the parks,” says Regional Parks Foundation Executive Director Lauren Bernstein. “Enabling local community organizations to implement their own culturally relevant programming in the Regional Parks ensures more East Bay communities can enjoy the parks without having to fit into an existing program model. This promotes meaningful park access in ways that better serve our communities.”

For José G. González, the Park District's equity officer, the partnerships represent an investment in the future.

“This pilot grant program is one way to deliver on the simple and powerful idea that everyone should have access to nature,” González says. “The program is an



Monument Crisis Center participants spend time at Miller/Knox Regional Shoreline.

(1) Along with the Park District, the Regional Parks Foundation was the leading Platinum sponsor of TOGETHER Bay Area's annual conference in May. "This year's conference was a huge success. Over 500 people from many different organizations with many different perspectives showed up and participated," says TOGETHER Bay Area Executive Director Annie Burke. "We're grateful for the ongoing support from the Foundation and Park District. It's amazing what we can accomplish and what we can learn by working together!"



People and Parks

Regional events bring community members and local leaders together in support of the environment



(2) Each year, the Foundation teams up with the Park District to host All Abilities Day events in the parks—fun-filled, daylong happenings that provide opportunities for everyone, regardless of ability, to explore nature at their own pace and in their own way. One of five 2026 All Abilities Day events was hosted at Big Break Regional Shoreline, which had an impressive turnout and inclusive activities for all abilities—including wildlife viewing, landscape painting, and a live animal presentation. **(3)** The Foundation was proud to support Friends of Sausal Creek's (FOSC) 30th Anniversary Summer Fair on July 25. Nearly 500 people gathered in Dimond Park, including longtime volunteers, donors, partners, and founding members, as well as many neighbors discovering FOSC for the first time. The celebration included a City of Oakland commendation presented by District 4 Councilmember Janani Ramachandran, custom block printing with artist Simone Lassar, an engaging Native Bird Connections presentation by Jenny Papka, and live bluegrass. **(4)** In March, the Foundation joined the Park District and other partners for the grand opening and ribbon-cutting of the Coyote Hills Restoration and Public Access Project—marking a 300-acre expansion of Coyote Hills Regional Park for public access. The newly protected section features additional parking, new picnic sites, electric vehicle charging stations, restrooms, trails, wildlife observation decks, and interpretive displays. **(5)** In August, the Foundation sponsored the Friends of the Regional Parks Botanic Garden's 30th Anniversary Celebration, commemorating 30 years of dedicated support for one of California's most treasured collections of native plants.





GOOD CLEAN FUN

An REI Co-op and AllTrails stewardship event brought volunteers together to clean up Brickyard Cove

At Brickyard Cove, a small beach tucked into McLaughlin Eastshore State Park, the tide leaves behind a steady stream of debris. The low-lying shoreline is a mudflat, and the cove acts as a catchall when the tide comes in. In April, nearly 100 volunteers joined forces to do something about it.

The cleanup, held in partnership with the East Bay Regional Park District, was part of the Better Trails Club—a collaboration between REI Co-op and AllTrails during Earth Month that brought outdoor enthusiasts together for stewardship projects in cities across the United States. At Brickyard Cove, volunteers spent two hours picking up garbage—mostly tiny pieces that can be easy to overlook.

“We collected piles and piles of trash. It was unbelievable,” says Haley Caruso, REI’s brand experience manager. “You couldn’t take even a couple steps without encountering a piece of debris, a wrapper, or a bottle cap.”

Volunteers filled buckets with litter as they worked along the beach. Park District staff helped with safety and trash removal, and a docent spoke with the group about “micro-trash” and its effects on wildlife.

The Brickyard project was one of six efforts organized through the REI-AllTrails initiative, with the shared goal of engaging local communities in stewardship of the outdoor spaces they use and enjoy.

Volunteers gather trash as part of a Better Trails Club cleanup at McLaughlin Eastshore State Park.



“We’re very like-minded organizations, and believe the outdoors is for all,” Caruso says. “We all work toward breaking down barriers for people to get outside. REI does that through our gear, expertise, and community, while the AllTrails app helps people find places to get outside with more confidence.”

Volunteer openings for the Brickyard outing filled within two or three days of promoting the project, and organizers ended up with a waiting list. For Caruso, that was one of the most encouraging parts of the experience.

“Bay Area residents are very engaged in protecting these places they love, and it was clear people want to do more of these events,” she says.

Following the cleanup, volunteers went to the REI Berkeley store for lunch, a scavenger hunt, and giveaways. Many who had arrived as strangers teamed up for the scavenger hunt and stayed to socialize.

“Not only did we take care of this place where so many people enjoy recreation opportunities, we also built a fun little community afterward,” Caruso says. “It was a win-win.”

For REI, stewardship is closely tied to its business and its members’ connection to the outdoors. The company supports local non-profits through the REI Fund and has worked with the Regional Parks Foundation for years.

“We’re proud to have been a partner of the East Bay Regional Park District and the Foundation for so long,” Caruso says. “Our collaborative efforts help people get outside, and that’s so important for all.”

The Brickyard Cove event on April 18 was timed to Earth Month.





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