

Healthy Parks Healthy People

# COMPASS

WINTER 2021



## Shared Spaces

A LOOK AT DIVERSITY AND INCLUSION EFFORTS IN OUR REGIONAL PARKS



IN THIS ISSUE: GM SAYS GOODBYE P. 3 • HOW COVID-19 CHANGED RECREATION P. 12 • INVESTING IN THE PARKS P. 16



## TIME OF CHANGE



What a year! The past 12 months have seen the East Bay, and the world at large, go through tremendous challenges.

The pandemic has altered the fabric of our daily life, while calls for social justice echoed throughout the country. Wildfires in the West and a historic string of air quality alerts in the Bay Area have highlighted the impact of climate change.

So what's the good news?

Through it all, the residents of the East Bay have shown great strength, adaptability and resilience—helping each other and discovering, or rediscovering, the essential role that nature plays in health. New visitors flocked to the parks in record numbers, joining longtime enthusiasts on the trails and driving home the value of green spaces for all communities (see page 6 for more on the importance of nature equity). The Park District's interpretive team found innovative ways to provide learning opportunities for children, and our wonderful Members showed their continued support for our regional parks.

Further changes lie ahead, including the retirement of Park District General Manager Robert Doyle: "This is a bad year to retire, but a great year to be leader," says Doyle. Read more of his parting words on page 3, and join the entire Foundation team in expressing our gratitude for his 47 years of dedicated leadership.



**Carol Johnson**  
Executive Director  
Regional Parks Foundation

**Robert Doyle**  
General Manager  
East Bay Regional Park District

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## DID YOU KNOW

### Fun facts about the East Bay Regional Park District



6

Length in inches of the California newt, which migrates between November and March to breed. South Park Drive in Tilden Regional Park closes during these months each year to protect the migrating newts.



217

The number of times backpacks were checked out through the Backpacks to Parks library program in 2019, reducing barriers to accessing regional parks for residents of both Contra Costa and Alameda counties.



6,902

The number of elementary school students who took the Fish Friends pledge last year, promising to do their part to keep our waterways and bodies of water clean.



93,386

Total number of volunteer hours provided to the Park District in 2019.



## LEADERSHIP IN CALM AND IN CRISIS

Bidding a fond farewell to retiring Park District General Manager Robert Doyle

**W**hen Robert Doyle began working at the Park District in 1973, cutting a fuel break at Tilden Regional Park, the landscape of the agency looked a little different. Now, on the eve of his retirement as general manager, Doyle reflects on the tremendous growth of the Park District, his 47-year tenure and leaving during such an eventful time. “It’s a bad year to retire, but it’s a great year to be a leader,” he says.

### **Between the pandemic and the fires, what have been some of the biggest lessons of this historic year?**

It’s very clear that parks are more essential than ever, as evidenced by the huge increase in visitation, including new people. The public’s demand and desire to have a place they can go to get out of their houses, get some exercise and enjoy mental health benefits have been remarkable. We started partnering with health agencies over a decade ago through our Healthy Parks Healthy People initiative, which helped us develop a unique and credible relationship with health providers. This was very helpful.

The parks also play a vital role in public land stewardship. It is critically important that the public and elected officials make a greater investment in managing forest and public lands—supporting the work to reduce fires—especially in the face of climate change. Fire management is an important tool for the health of the forests and wildlife, as well as the safety of people. If we let these forests grow and don’t do anything to be good stewards of that land [such as grazing, controlled burns and fuels management], we’re in for a world of trouble; with climate change upon us, we are going to have more and larger fires. We are doing our part, but there needs to be a much greater investment, especially at the federal and state levels. We [also] need a climate army of young workers!

The importance of public support, advocacy and fundraising through partnerships with nonprofits like ours with the Regional Parks Foundation is critical to park agencies, especially at times like this.

### **What makes the Park District so special?**

Frederick Law Olmsted is a hero of mine, and his philosophy was that parks are there for everyone, not just the rich and powerful. Since the Park District was created in the 1930s, in the heart of the Great Depression, that has always been a guiding principle. From 1934 to 1970 the District’s focus was on creating the original hill parks along the ridgelines of the East Bay; today, we have a vast connected landscape.

With strong citizen leadership, the District began a new effort to bring more parks to its urban East Bay shoreline. We were one of the first park agencies to look at equity and inclusion, redoubling our focus to include the urban shoreline and taking on the development battles to create parks where there weren’t any before. In 1992, the District began its most ambitious urban park effort, acquiring and restoring the McLaughlin Eastshore State Park. Today the District offers over 55 miles of San Francisco Bay shoreline parks, serving our most densely populated and diverse areas of the East Bay, providing restored habitat and access to the bay and environmental programs.

### **What will you miss about being general manager?**

The great people and projects, the love of the staff for the parks, and the reputation of this wonderful park agency as a national leader. Working with our talented staff—especially the incredible leadership team—and the board has been a true honor. ... [Now], as a lifelong student of nature, I want to see more unique landscapes and travel with my wife, Tina Batt. Of course, I will continue to be an advocate for parks and preserving the last, best places for people and our planet.

I will miss the fast lane, but this has been a very stressful time. Trying to keep the parks open and everyone safe, especially the staff, during COVID-19 while managing the surge in use and then during all of the fires—this is the hardest thing I’ve ever done. There are certainly difficult challenges ahead, but I am confident that great ideas will happen and the Park District will continue to thrive.



**Top:** District tool kits guide students through activities such as owl pellet dissection, nature journaling and terrarium making. **Bottom:** Park staff lead virtual learning opportunities.

# Nature Learning Goes Online

New virtual interpretive projects bring Park District education opportunities home

One-person guided explorations of wildlife and other natural wonders in the Park District may be limited these days, but young learners can still engage with the outdoors through a wealth of virtual and interpretive opportunities. Here's a look at some recent interactive introductions.

Take a deep dive into some of the more remote regional parks with the help of your phone. The Park District and partner Timelooper have added several new virtual and augmented reality experiences, including looks at Mission Peak Regional Preserve and Coyote Hills Regional Park, to the existing lineup on the Timelooper app, with more still to come.

In March, the Black Diamond Mines Regional Preserve planned to open a new exhibit, a partial reproduction of a working coal mine, as part of the existing salt mine tour. Now, the exhibition is accessible to virtual visitors as a Timelooper experience, allowing for a one-of-a-kind historical perspective through an augmented reality re-creation of the town of Somersville and information about the former mining community.

"When shelter-in-place began, Parks to People expanded rapidly into a full-scale digital learning program," says Kevin Damstra, supervising naturalist. "Modern education standards push students to self-explore and determine their own conclusions. These virtual tours provide a more in-depth experience that connects with students in a deeper way."

The Regional Parks Foundation has also funded a series of tool kits to aid in self-directed nature lessons and recreation opportunities for families and community groups. The tool kits will be periodically refreshed with new items and topics to explore. "The tool kits have enabled EBRPD to maintain community partnerships



and relationships by providing opportunities for engagement, both virtually and through family pod programming. Throughout the fall, groups like Girls Inc. have met with a naturalist each week online, visiting different parks on virtual hikes and still having hands-on opportunities," says naturalist Morgan Guenther.

Children will also love the digital learning videos available on the Park District's website ([www.ebparks.org](http://www.ebparks.org)) and social media channels. At the start of the pandemic, the interpretive team revved up existing efforts to increase online education, filming short lessons to keep young ones interested in science. The Foundation bought digital equipment to help support these efforts, and new videos are online that explore birding, geology, the food chain and more.

Still on the horizon: A new Ohlone basket display, highlighting 15 baskets (including a selection that is more than 100 years old), is slated to arrive at Coyote Hills Regional Park in early 2021; this exhibit may even include a virtual experience for at-home history buffs.

# Foundation Principals

Meet the Regional Parks Foundation's board of directors (a multipart series)



**JESS BROWN**

President, 7 years on the board

**What's your professional background?**

I have worked for PG&E for 36 years, primarily serving the greater Bay Area, and have held various leadership roles in operations, business development and sustainable energy solutions.

**Why are you a member of the Foundation board?**

I grew up enjoying the various East Bay regional parks. I find it a privilege to help others access and experience our beautiful parks and numerous programs. We have one of the most beautiful regional park systems in the United States literally at our doorsteps! We must never take that for granted and do everything we can, today, to ensure we pass it on to generations long after us.



**PETER LIU**

Vice President, 5 years

**What's your professional background?**

I have been working to invest in the future of sustainable energy and food systems over the last two decades. I am currently the managing director of Clean Energy Advantage Partners, which has advised global corporations on investing to achieve 100% renewable energy goals.

**What would you like to see the board and the Park District accomplish now and in the future?**

The parks' importance to the community has only been magnified during COVID-19. I would like the board and District to continue to broaden our mission of "access for all." Additionally, I would love for the parks to be a catalyst in showing the healing power of nature and a reminder that we also must heal the damages we have done to our natural environment and social fabric.



**HELANE MORRISON**

Treasurer, 5 years

**What's your professional background?**

I am the general counsel and chief compliance officer of investment advisory firm Hall Capital Partners LLC.

**What would you like to see the board and the Park District accomplish in the future?**

During the pandemic, the parks have been an important outlet for people, but the pandemic has also limited the District's ability to offer many of the typical activities that the Foundation supports, such as swimming lessons and camperships for underserved kids. I'm looking forward to the time when we can get back to offering more of those programs. Over the last several years, the Foundation has been growing and attracting more paid Memberships, donations from companies and gifts given by people through their wills and estates. The more donations the Foundation receives, the more we can do in our parks.



**LES HAUSRATH**

Secretary, 4 years

**What's your professional background?**

I'm a partner with Wendel Rosen, LLP, working in real estate law and litigation. I started working at my current firm in 1981, and my primary client was the EBRPD.

**Why are you a member of the Foundation board?**

The Foundation funds so many programs and supports outreach to the community. I am very active in nonprofits and it seemed like a natural fit for me. I'm interested in increasing our reach to underserved communities. The parks are such an incredible resource and include huge swaths of land that are protected from development—offering space to contemplate and enjoy nature.



**THOMAS MEIER**

Director/Chair of the Finance Committee, 6 years

**What's your professional background?**

I'm the senior vice president and corporate treasurer at Kaiser Permanente. I've been in numbers and finance my whole career.

**Why are you a member of the Foundation board?**

I'm a strong advocate for enjoying the outdoors, as are my four kids. I want to allow others to have those great experiences as well and ensure access to people in underserved communities. I want to make sure that the Foundation has the financial support it needs to help subsidize that access.



**KEITH WHITE**

Director/Chair of Diversity Task Force, 3 years

**What's your professional background?**

I'm a security professional and am currently the global chief of safety and security for Salesforce.com. I have worked for companies like Gap and Target, protecting their team members and assets around the world.

**What is your biggest priority now and in the future?**

Ensuring that we focus on our communities of color and compensate for the fact that they may not even know about the great experiences that they can have in our parks. I'd like to see us build relationships with nontraditional entities within the community and tell them: Here is what we can offer, here are the benefits, let's experience this together. Just because we open the park gates doesn't mean that people will come, especially people of color. That's not a given.



# BRIDGING THE NATURE GAP

ADDRESSING DIVERSITY  
AND INCLUSION CONCERNS  
IN OUR REGIONAL PARKS





**R**ue Mapp, the Oakland-based founder of Outdoor Afro—a national nonprofit focused on connecting Black communities with open-air experiences—has called nature a true equalizer: “You go out in nature and the trees don’t know you are Black. The birds are going to sing, no matter how much money is in your bank account. The flowers are going to bloom, no matter what your gender is or whether you are a Democrat or Republican.”

Unfortunately, while Mother Nature may not see skin color or wealth, the distribution of parks, beaches and other open spaces is far from equitable in the United States. In fact, a July 2020 study by the Center for American Progress found that people of color are three times more likely than white people to live in an area that is nature-deprived; 70% of low-income communities are in nature-deprived locales.

“The distribution of these nature disparities is not an accident,” Shanna Edberg, one of the report’s authors, told *National Geographic* magazine. “It was a choice made over generations, from redlining, to choosing to exclude minorities from certain neighborhoods, to choosing to put parks in certain neighborhoods, to choosing to pave over communities of color to build highways and coal plants.”

This “nature gap” impacts these communities in myriad ways, including restricted access to no- or low-cost exercise, reduced mental and physical health advantages, and fewer

learning opportunities for young people. Even with the East Bay’s wealth of regional parks, there are barriers such as transportation or lack of exposure to outdoor opportunities.

“People need to understand the benefits that nature can provide,” says Keith White, Regional Parks Foundation board member and chair of the Diversity and Inclusion Task Force. “What is missing is the spark that gets people off their traditional paths and on to something that they probably haven’t tried before. Families may engage in sports or go to amusement parks—often camping or hiking isn’t even on the list of activities. Our goal is to get those things on the list. Why not add exploration of our parks to how we relax and enjoy ourselves?”

To that end, White hopes to build on outreach to churches, the NAACP and other local organizations, as well as hold more events (post-social distancing) that specifically draw people of color to the parks—complete with advertising in



From left: Participants enjoy (pre-social distancing) Multicultural Wellness Walks at Garin Regional Park, Reinhardt Redwood Regional Park and Crockett Hills Regional Park.

“I believe the ‘good trouble’ our country has been experiencing through the Black Lives Matter movement creates an opportunity for going well beyond the Regional Parks Foundation’s historical mission of access for all. We see a future moving beyond simply facilitating access and more toward creating a truly inviting and inclusive park experience particularly for all Black, indigenous and people of color.”

—Jess Brown, Regional Parks Foundation board president

newspapers and on radio stations within those communities.

“There needs to be a change in thinking in all areas,” says White. “The board is committed to revisiting how we approach diversity, inclusion, equality and belonging. We need to meet the people we are reaching out to halfway; it’s important for us to go the extra mile to let them know that the parks are here for them as well. That’s the formula for us as a society coming together.”

This summer, the Foundation committed to funding 750 one-year Memberships for families of color, available through local community and nonprofit organizations. (Marathon Petroleum recently made a generous \$5,000 donation to that effort, along with a \$15,000 donation for the purchase of three e-bikes to support public safety in the parks.)

Says White, “Our goal is not only to make people feel welcome, but feel like they belong.”

## HEALTHY PARKS, HEALTHIER PEOPLE

The COVID-19 pandemic and resulting social distancing restrictions reaffirmed the vital role that the parks play in health for all communities.

“Human beings didn’t start out in urban concrete and buildings. We started out in nature, and it’s really important to us as human beings and to our overall health,” says Erica Pan, M.D., acting state health officer at the California Department of Public Health.

“Nature and parks provide medicine for our mind, body and emotions during this stressful prolonged pandemic,” concurs Rohan Radhakrishna, M.D., deputy health officer – Contra Costa County. “They can help mitigate the impact of past and current trauma and minimize the effects of chronic diseases like diabetes and heart disease. To heal and recharge our spirit, children and adults need less screen time and more green time.”

Data shows that COVID-19 has disproportionately impacted communities of color, in part due to limited health care access, exposure to the virus at work, crowded housing and other social determinants of health.

“This pandemic has further exposed gross inequities in our society. We must ensure that park access isn’t just for the privileged,” says Dr. Radhakrishna, who is also the co-chair of the Health Equity Committee for the California Conference of Local Health Officers. “For the great outdoors to truly be great, it must be welcoming and inclusive for low-income communities and people of color that often suffer the worst health and socioeconomic inequities and have the most to gain from the salubrious effects of nature.”

Like Keith White, Dr. Radhakrishna sees the need for more multilingual outreach to engage diverse peoples, as well as partnerships with government, faith-based and other community organizations. Inclusion efforts also have to happen at the agency level.

“We must move beyond words and confessions. Nature and park organizations need to diversify all levels of staff, executive leadership and boards to better reflect and represent the communities they aim to serve. All organizations need a publicly available Racial Equity Action Plan with timelines and outcomes,” adds Dr. Radhakrishna.

## A FUNDAMENTAL OBLIGATION

Outgoing Park District General Manager Robert Doyle is a longtime believer in his field’s “fundamental democratic obligation to provide places for everyone, not just the rich and powerful.” The Park District has focused on developing



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**—Rohan Radhakrishna, M.D., deputy health officer – Contra Costa County**



Clockwise from left: Park visitors take advantage of the health benefits of time spent in the outdoors at Roberts Regional Recreation Area, Martin Luther King Jr. Regional Shoreline and Tilden Regional Park.



parklands near urban centers since the 1970s and maintained a commitment to funding aquatic programs even as other agencies stopped.

“Lakes and swimming pools are critically important for people who don’t have the wealth to belong to a gym or have a pool in their backyard,” says Doyle.

In addition to breaking down language barriers, diversity in staffing, improving park access and welcoming new users through programs like the District’s multicultural walks, Doyle says it’s also important that park visitors feel safe.

“The great thing about our interpretation program is we invite people to come along with us—providing guidance about exploring the parks and creating a safe environment,” he says. “One simple barrier to access is people’s concerns about safety in the parks, everything from crime to rattlesnakes to poison oak. All of these new users are wonderful and give us a huge opportunity to demonstrate the healing power of nature, but these positive intentions don’t work if there are not enough public safety officers or if people are scared to breathe the air.”

Doyle cites the need for national and statewide efforts to invest in public lands—helping with fuels management and fire prevention, funding safety officers and maintenance staff, and mitigating the impact of climate change (see page 3 for more).

“We have to address those really colossal issues right now,” Doyle says, “in addition to inviting more people into our parks who have not felt invited in the past.”

# RECREATION RES



CALLI GODLEY

# AND

# HOW THE PANDEMIC HAS CHANGED THE WAY WE ENJOY THE REGIONAL PARKS

# RESPONSIBILITY

**T**he COVID-19 health crisis has impacted almost every area of daily life, from employment to social interactions to education—and it has also changed the way we spend time outdoors.

As recreation options were restricted during the shelter-in-place earlier this year, and continued to be limited in the subsequent months, more people than ever turned to nature for their mental and physical well-being. In fact, county health agencies officially recognized the parks as essential to the community.

Both regular and new visitors flocked to the Park District, hitting the trails in unprecedented numbers even as other parts of the parks, including playgrounds and swimming pools, remained closed. The Park District had to quickly adapt to new circumstances, working to protect the health and safety of its staff as well as the surge of East Bay residents who now consider their regional parks a vital part of daily life.



“There was no playbook for a pandemic,” says Jim O’Connor, Park District assistant general manager. “We’ve handled floods, fires, crowds, smoke, but the pandemic was a completely new thing. There were so many unknowns about the coronavirus and how it was transmitted.”

In the early days of the shelter-in-place order, the Park District worked quickly to establish staff and visitor safety protocols, communicating with health departments and other agencies to determine how to best handle basics such as restroom management and trash collection along with recreation activities. Public meeting facilities and visitor centers were closed and picnicking and camping were prohibited. “We emphasized trail use,” recalls O’Connor, who notes that trail usage has had a 400% increase.

As health guidance around COVID-19 became clearer, including the need for face coverings and the importance of social distancing, an additional focus turned toward visitor education.

“There is no way to force people to comply with social distancing,” says O’Connor. “We had to educate them.”

Signage was put up throughout the District and messages went out on social media highlighting park user guidelines such as maintaining 6 feet of distance from other people, using hand sanitizer, wearing face masks, keeping dogs on leash, carrying out trash and bringing water. With the support of the Regional Parks Foundation, ads were placed in local print publications reaffirming those guidelines, while health officials from Contra Costa and Alameda counties took part in public service announcements emphasizing the value of spending time in nature.

Park users took note, sharing their appreciation for the District and, for the most part, following the safety regulations. However, the surge of visitors, many of them new to parks, brought challenges.

“People who have not been traditional park users were coming in with a lack of understanding about the norms of park use; they were not prepared for heat or steepness of trails, not wearing proper footwear or carrying water,” says O’Connor. “Early on, we had new users getting lost in the parks and we had to go out and rescue them. There are still people pushing their limits and requiring medical calls.”

Overcrowding is another ongoing concern, with packed trails and parking lots not allowing for social distancing. The Park District tries to encourage visitors to consider alternate parks and less popular times to alleviate overcrowding. Says O’Connor, “We are doing our best, but there are limits

**“WE ARE DOING OUR BEST, BUT THERE ARE LIMITS TO WHAT THE PARK DISTRICT CAN DO WITH CROWD MANAGEMENT. THE COMMUNITIES AND PEOPLE WE SERVE HAVE A ROLE IN SAFE PARK USAGE. THEY HAVE TO TAKE PERSONAL RESPONSIBILITY.”**

**—JIM O’CONNOR, PARK DISTRICT ASSISTANT GENERAL MANAGER**



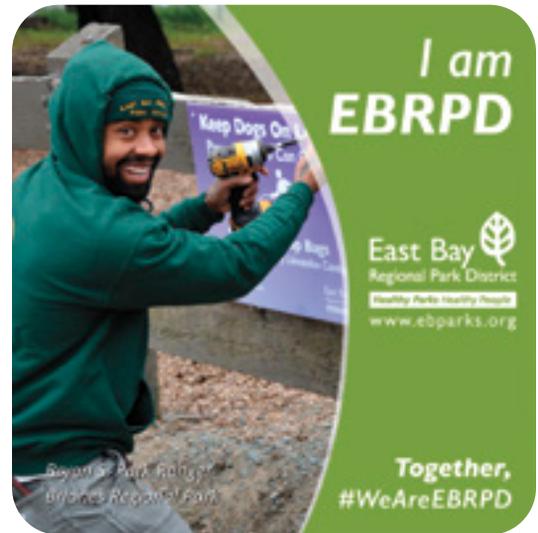
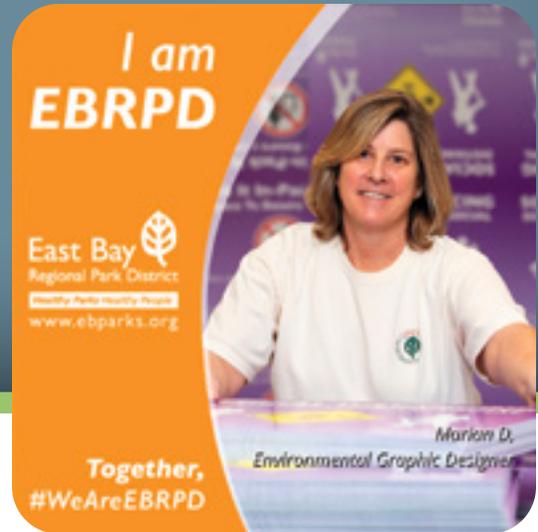
Las Trampas Regional Wilderness Park



Temescal Regional Recreation Area



From top left: Iron Horse Trail bikers follow the public health recommendations to wear face coverings; social media ads highlight the work of Park District staff during the pandemic.



to what the Park District can do with crowd management. The communities and people we serve have a role in safe park usage. They have to take personal responsibility.”

“The pandemic has changed the way we enjoy nature,” adds Juliana Schirmer, chief administrative officer for the Foundation. “We have to think ahead, bring water, masks and hand sanitizer. We need to plan when we visit parks and at what times to adjust for crowds.”

Park interpretation programs have also undergone a change, with learning opportunities taking place online instead of in person. “We did a big pivot to virtual learning,” says O’Connor. “In the past, we were limited in the number of children we could impact through field trips in a year. As we up our game in the digital world, we can reach all the teachers in the District and beyond. And while it’s not the same as taking kids through a creek or along the shoreline of the bay, it will help our reach and messaging about the importance of parks.”

If infection rates go down and public restrictions loosen, the interpretation team is planning for in-person programming with limited cohorts of children. The Park District also expanded other recreation activities in October, reopening select fishing and camping sites with reduced capacity at Del Valle and Anthony Chabot Regional Parks. The staff is

already looking at scenarios for summer 2021. “Most likely, we are going to be operating like this for a while, so we need to rethink how we operate under the new normal,” says O’Connor.

Among the positives of this challenging situation have been the rediscovery of nature for so many people and the greater understanding of the lasting value of parks.

“Parks have a lot to offer, but people moved away from them,” O’Connor adds. “If anything, [the pandemic] has helped change this nature deficit. We can only watch so much TV or look at devices so long. People are rediscovering their parks again, spending time with their families. It’s a whole new world. That’s a positive outcome.”

Schirmer agrees. “We are pleased that more people are discovering the benefits of nature through our parks,” she says.



Reinhardt Redwood Regional Park

# A Sound Investment

Supporting our regional parks benefits the community in countless ways

The value of the Park District to our community has never been greater. During the long months of the coronavirus pandemic, our regional parks have been a cherished lifeline for many area residents, who have turned to them for exercise, recreation, fresh air and soothing immersion in nature.

As this challenging year comes to an end, it's a good time to reflect on why the parks are such an important investment for the health and well-being of our community. This year, for example, the Park District nimbly adapted to the COVID-19 crisis by ensuring safety precautions in the parks as well as by increasing virtual programs. These measures will continue going forward, as the Park District remains committed to serving the community's evolving needs. And for those in a position to contribute to this trusted resource, supporting the parks is an investment that will give back many times over.

## INVESTING IN THE FUTURE

"If we don't invest in the parks now, they are not going to be taken care of," says Anne Kassebaum, chief of Interpretive and Recreation Services for the Park District. "And I am not just talking about a monetary investment, but also a social investment. If you don't manage and take care of the parks, this is a resource that is not always going to be here."

Kassebaum notes that she and her team did a "massive switch" this year, as they pivoted from in-person offerings to virtual ones. They posted dozens of engaging videos on the District's website and developed a variety of teaching tools for East Bay

▶ Voters in western Alameda and Contra Costa counties demonstrated their ongoing support for the Park District in 2018, passing Measure FF (a parcel tax in support of safety measures and improvements in the parks) with 85.6% of the vote.

classrooms (see page 4 for more). This is a top priority because getting young people interested in nature has a much-needed ripple effect: They learn to be environmental stewards at an early age, and they share their passion with others. In a typical year, some 66,000 schoolchildren visit the parks; the goal, Kassebaum says, is to continue serving as many as possible by arranging smaller, socially distanced groups and sparking young learners' curiosity through virtual encounters.

"Our connection with kids is an investment in the future," Kassebaum says. "After experiencing the parks through our programs, they go home and tell their parents and grandparents and friends about it. And then they all come back together, and the student is opening the door for others."

### BUILDING FOR TOMORROW

The Park District also helps create community through expansion initiatives. In the works are several major projects, including the remodeling of the Del Valle Regional Park Visitor Center and the construction of a new interpretive pavilion at Shadow Cliffs Regional Recreation Area. Projects such as these benefit the community in many ways, as they are not only educational resources but also a source of employment for area residents and contractors.

In fact, the parks offer several other economic benefits to the region that may not be immediately apparent. For example, it is estimated that the parks provide health care savings of some \$20 million annually, thanks to their accessibility for regular exercise (even more important during the pandemic with health restrictions on indoor gyms). They also contribute to increased land value for homeowners, as proximity to parklands is at a premium in the region. According to a 2017 economic analysis, the total economic value of the Park District for the East Bay is \$500 million annually.

It's clear that the parks are a fundamental part of the East Bay's ecosystem, which is why their ongoing vitality is of critical importance.

In response to the current situation, the Regional Parks Foundation, which supports many of the Park District's community activities, has adapted some of its funding priorities. For example, says Juliana Schirmer, chief administrative officer for the Foundation, it has recently focused on funding the equipment to produce virtual programming and supported expanded home- and library-based materials for students. "We feel strongly that the connection with nature is so important," Schirmer says. "So many people have reached out to us to express that recently."



Rendering of the future interpretive pavilion at Shadow Cliffs Regional Recreation Area.



With Foundation support, improvements are in the works at visitor centers, including one at Del Valle Regional Park.

Schirmer says that the Foundation will be giving the District \$425,000 in 2021, but the parks' biggest revenue generator—the Membership program—understandably took a hit during the pandemic. "We expect a 40% decrease in revenue in 2020, and same for 2021 if COVID-19 doesn't change," she says, adding that the need for additional support from the community is still great.

"Right now, in this vortex with COVID, just being outside of your house, in the calmness of nature, is so important," says Kassebaum. "That's why we encourage investing in the parks. Because investing in the parks is investing in the connection between healthy parks and healthy people."

**▶ If you are interested in supporting these important programs, visit [www.RegionalParksFoundation.org](http://www.RegionalParksFoundation.org). No gift is too small, and your contributions will go a long way in underwriting these efforts.**



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## Safe Celebrations

Park staff and supporters honor a longtime parks supporter at the dedication for the new Judge John Sutter Regional Shoreline park, enjoy virtual interpretive programming and recognize the International Day of Peace, among other notable events.



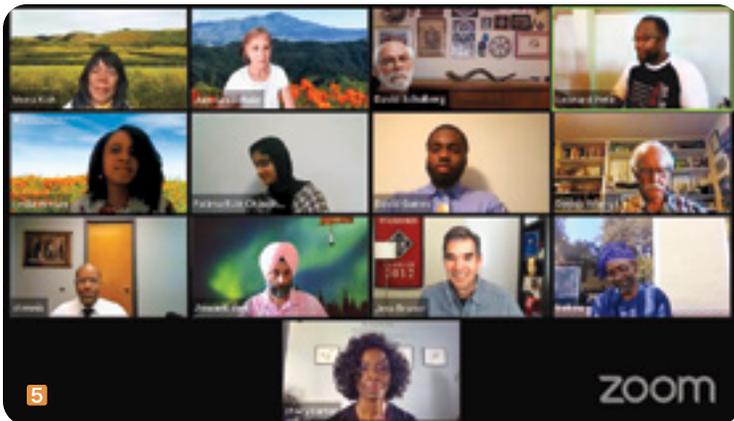
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1 Park District General Manager Robert Doyle speaks at the Judge John Sutter Regional Shoreline dedication. 2-5 Recent virtual events include naturalist-led Walk and Talks; an SF Bay Trail Assessment and Adaptation Prioritization Plan webinar; an Albany Beach celebration; and a Zoom meet-up for the International Day of Peace. 6 The Concert at the Cove show goes on in Alameda.



## Invaluable Resource

Margaret Rossoff appreciates the regional parks—in good times and bad

Of the many natural oases in the Park District, Margaret Rossoff considers Reinhardt Redwood Regional Park her “absolute favorite”; she loves hiking in the Oakland park because of the excellent exercise and stunning vistas. “Once I discovered the French Trail, I was addicted,” she says. “You see all these amazing redwoods; you go up high and have the soft path underneath you. It’s just glorious.”

The “almost retired” family therapist has been an avid fan of the regional parks for more than four decades and appreciates the diversity of the parklands. “One place you can look at mountains, another you can look down at civilization, another you’re surrounded by trees, another you’re looking at orchids or irises—it’s just amazing,” she says. “I grew up in Brooklyn, so having nature be so accessible is extraordinary.”

Over the years, the regional parks have been a constant for Rossoff—the backdrop of hikes with friends, activities with her son when he was a child, potlucks, memorials and even weddings. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the parks continue to offer welcome social interaction.

“My contact with people is over the phone or screen, and taking a walk, you see real people,” she says. “Probably people you don’t know—but there will be these casual conversations for a minute that enrich our lives during this isolation.”

“[Some Membership benefits] might be limited, but the capacities the parks give us during the pandemic are even more valuable.”

—MARGARET ROSSOFF

While some of the more tangible Membership benefits were put on hold due to COVID-19 restrictions during the spring and summer, Rossoff renewed her Membership this fall—and made an additional donation to help support the programs and stewardship efforts funded by Member fees. “I’ve looked at what institutions are most valuable to me,” she says, noting the importance of fresh air during coronavirus closures. “On the one hand, [some Membership benefits] might be limited, but on the other, the capacities the parks give us during the pandemic are even more valuable.

“With the pandemic, we have to look at what we want to make sure comes out the other end and survives,” she adds, “and the regional parks [are] definitely at the top of my list.”



## TRAILS CHALLENGE 2021

▶ The annual Trails Challenge kicks off on Jan. 4, 2021, with face covering and social distancing protocols in place according to county health guidelines. Every year, more than 10,000 people participate in this free self-guided hiking and bicycling program, exploring the regional parks and enjoying the health benefits of activity in nature. The Trails Challenge is co-sponsored by the Regional Parks Foundation, Kaiser Permanente and the East Bay Regional Park District. Visit [www.ebparcs.org/trailchallenge](http://www.ebparcs.org/trailchallenge) to find out more.

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