

**More Isn't Always Better:
Evicting the Middle Class
For Open Space
Trends
September, 2006**

In my younger days, I hiked along the Appalachian Trail. I still enjoy walking the many trails through woods and meadows within the urban areas where I live and visit. I most certainly appreciate the scenic beauty of the San Francisco Bay Area's many natural vistas. But from my perspective, having more open space, like a lot of other wonderful things, is not necessarily better. This opinion differs greatly from that of many conservationists who seem to espouse the philosophy that no place can have too much open space or too little development.

Mark Baldassare, Director of Research at the Public Policy Institute of California, reports the Institute's polls since 2000 have found that more than half of California voters approve of spending additional tax dollars to expand open space. Gov. Schwarzenegger recently asked the federal government to prohibit future logging and development on about 4 million acres of federal land in California. In November, Californians will vote on a bond issue that would authorize an additional \$1.3 billion to be spent on open space. This bond issue appears to have no opposition even though California voters agreed to shell out \$6 billion for park and water-quality projects just four years ago.

In El Cerrito, California, where I have lived for forty years, an organization that claims to have 500 resident members has launched a campaign urging our city council not to allow any development on 15 acres of privately owned vacant hillside land not far from my house. When I visit my local nursery, the woman who advises me on what kind of plants to buy for my yard wears a "Restore Hetch Hetchy" button and urges me to support the conservationists who are arguing that \$10 billion should be spent to return to their natural state the lakes and dams that store the water serving San Francisco and many other Bay area communities.

I'm sure you get the picture. But the numbers contained in a July 16th *San Francisco Chronicle* article about the past accomplishments and future goals of open space advocates in the Bay Area are nevertheless what my grandchildren would call awesome. The Bay Area contains 4.5 million acres of land, of which 720,000 acres are developed while 1.1 million acres already are in protected open space. Conservationists want to set aside another 1 million acres -- that is, they want roughly 46 percent of the urban region to be permanently protected from development.

Given that in the United States as a whole, only a little over 5 percent of land is developed, keeping a little less than half of the urban region free of development may seem reasonable. But if you will allow me to sound like an economist, forever keeping that much of an urban area from development is creating many unintended consequences. The shortage of land for residential development and redevelopment already has pushed the median price of housing in the region over the \$600,000 mark. Many middle-class workers who want to raise their families in single-family homes now commute daily from the more affordable, warmer Central Valley.

Some of the unintended environmental consequences of the Bay Area's open-space successes were brought home to the urban areas during a recent atypical summer heat wave. Arthur H. Rosenfeld, a member of the California Energy Commission, summed up one of the reasons the area came close to another rolling blackout experience: "The air conditioning load is going up like mad because of new communities in hot places." The situation also increases water usage and fuel consumption, the latter a product of the extended commute for those who have been evicted from the Bay Area by the politically induced shortage of land.

Clearly, the shortage of land is not the only factor creating a shortage of housing sites, but it does play a significant role. Further, if the land is left in private hands but prohibited from development, the

recreational benefits will not be great. While I have not done a study of what could be done to increase the recreational benefits from open space, my own walks through public lands and efforts to support park enhancement make me suspect spending money to improve the utility of existing close-in parks would be more cost effective than spending more tax dollars to expand the scale of public open space.

The personal efforts that my wife and I have made to support parks include a donation for the purchase and maintenance of a bench in the Rhododendron Dell of Golden Gate Park in San Francisco. We made our donation 21 years ago because we wanted to repay the city for the pleasure we enjoyed walking through the garden as the flowers were blooming. Unfortunately, it has been many years since we have had that pleasure, as the City of San Francisco has been unable to take enough money out of its \$5.7 billion dollar budget to maintain the famed rhododendrons. Clearly, as this example attests, there are ways to increase urban dwellers' enjoyment of open space without evicting would-be entrants to a middle-class life style.



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