

John Sutter

John Sutter: A Collaborative Approach to Preserving Open Space

East Bay Park District Parkland Oral History Project

Interviews conducted by
Shanna Farrell
in 2020

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Since 1953 the Oral History Center of The Bancroft Library, formerly the Regional Oral History Office, has been interviewing leading participants in or well-placed witnesses to major events in the development of Northern California, the West, and the nation. Oral History is a method of collecting historical information through recorded interviews between a narrator with firsthand knowledge of historically significant events and a well-informed interviewer, with the goal of preserving substantive additions to the historical record. The recording is transcribed, lightly edited for continuity and clarity, and reviewed by the interviewee. The corrected manuscript is bound with photographs and illustrative materials and placed in The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley, and in other research collections for scholarly use. Because it is primary material, oral history is not intended to present the final, verified, or complete narrative of events. It is a spoken account, offered by the interviewee in response to questioning, and as such it is reflective, partisan, deeply involved, and irreplaceable.

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John Sutter, 2020

Abstract

Judge John Sutter was born in San Francisco, California in 1928, and grew up across the Bay in Oakland. The outdoors played a role in his early life, and in this interview he shares his childhood memories of going out to Oakland's shoreline to fly model airplanes. He became active in conservation advocacy and park development in the late 1950s–1960s that included a recommendation in 1967 to the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) on the conversion of the Oakland Army Air Base at the foot of the eastern span of the San Francisco-Oakland Bay Bridge into a gateway park for the city of Oakland. He never stopped fighting for a park there, and over fifty years later, his vision came to pass when the Judge John Sutter Regional Shoreline (JJSRS) opened to the public in 2020. In 1958 he joined the Save San Pablo Dam campaign committee and became a co-founder of Citizens for Regional Recreation and Parks; later called People for Open Space, and which is now the Greenbelt Alliance. In 1961 he organized a successful campaign to save Snow Museum Site, a city park on Oakland's Lake Merritt that was proposed to become commercial development; he later led another campaign that saved Lake Merritt from a large parking garage development at Bellevue and Grand Avenues. He also worked on Oakland Measure DD to secure funding for the San Francisco Bay Trail and participated in saving the Ninth Ave. Terminal with the Oakland Heritage Alliance. Judge Sutter passed away in 2021, just months after this interview was conducted and the naming of JJSRS, at the age of 92 after a long and distinguished career in public service, including as an East Bay Regional Park District Board Member (1996–2016), Oakland City Council Member (1971–1982), and Alameda County Superior Court Judge (beginning in 1982). He also served on many boards including the Sierra Club, YMCA, Oakland Citizens Committee for Urban Renewal (OCCUR), Oakland Shoreline Committee, Oakland Arts Council and Oakland Cultural Affairs Commission. His many awards and honors include the "Making Democracy Work" award from the League of Women Voters. In this interview, Judge Sutter discusses his early life, interest in preserving open space, involvement with the East Bay Regional Park District, experience securing the land for Judge John Sutter Regional Shoreline, and his involvement with various environmental projects.

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Project History

The East Bay Regional Park District (EBRPD) is a special regional district that stretches across both Alameda and Contra Costa Counties. First established in 1934 by Alameda County voters, the EBRPD slowly expanded to Contra Costa in 1964 and has continued to grow and preserve the East Bay's most scenic and historically significant parklands. The EBRPD's core mission is to acquire, develop, and maintain diverse and interconnected parklands in order to provide the public with usable natural spaces and to preserve the region's natural and cultural resources.

This oral history project—The East Bay Regional Park District Oral History Project—records and preserves the voices and experiences of formative, retired EBRPD field staff, individuals associated with land use of EBRPD parklands prior to district acquisition, and individuals who continue to use parklands for agriculture and ranching.

The Oral History Center (OHC) of The Bancroft Library at the University of California, Berkeley first engaged in conversations with the EBRPD in the fall of 2016 about the possibility of restarting an oral history project on the parklands. The OHC, previously the Regional Oral History Office, had conducted interviews with EBRPD board members, supervisors and individuals historically associated with the parklands throughout the 1970s and early 2000s. After the completion of a successful pilot project in late 2016, the EBRPD and OHC began a more robust partnership in early 2017 that will result in an expansive collection of interviews.

The interviews in this collection reflect the diverse yet interconnected ecology of individuals and places that have helped shape and define the East Bay Regional Park District and East Bay local history.

Interview 1: November 20, 2020

01-00:00:05

Farrell: All right, this is Shanna Farrell with Judge John Sutter on Friday, November 20, 2020. This is an interview for the East Bay Regional Park District Parkland Oral History Project for UC [University of California] Berkeley, and we are talking via Zoom. John, can you start by telling me where and when you were born, and about the role that the open space or the outdoors played in your early life?

01-00:00:34

Sutter: I was born in San Francisco on July 15, 1928, and well, the outdoors was something I enjoyed, especially in the summer. We would go up to the Oakland camp in the Sierras. It's now a San Jose camp. I remember watching the wildlife. I was fascinated with the woodpeckers, and it was a very nice experience. We had swimming there and other activities. I did enjoy the outdoors. Then, later on, when I was in college, and after that, I got into hiking, and I used to hike quite a bit. I went to Sierra Club hikes, and other groups. There was a group in Oakland. This is by the time I'm an adult, with the Montclair hiking group. I did that a lot. That was kind of my background.

01-00:01:58

Farrell: Can you tell me on that note how you got involved with the East Bay Regional Park District, and roughly what time period that was?

01-00:2:10

Sutter: I was involved in conservation issues before I was on the park district board. But of course, I knew of the park district, and in fact I was lobbying the park district, particularly with respect to Martin Luther King Park [Martin Luther King Jr. Regional Shoreline]. I would go to their meetings a lot, particularly to try to lobby the then park district to support this proposed park near the Oakland airport, which finally happened. So, I was involved with the park district early on.

01-00:02:49

Of course, I had been involved in a lot of other conservation things apart from the park district. I was involved in the issue about the East Bay MUD [Municipal Utility District] park, park area in Contra Costa County, and I worked with the group that was fighting for more parkland. That was in 1958. A lot of them I just mentioned in the highlights. In 1961, the City of Oakland decided that they wanted to basically give away, or give up one of the main parks circling Lake Merritt, Snow Park, and I really organized the opposition to that. Because they had provided that it was subject to a vote of the people, it was going to be on the ballot anyway. I had the No on Snow Park issue, and I headed up that campaign, which was a successful campaign. That didn't involve the park district so much, although we got support from people who were active in the park district. I don't know, and on and on, there are other issues too with respect to the park district.

01-00:04:33

Farrell: Why was conservation advocacy and those efforts important to you, as you know, in the late '50s and '60s?

01-00:04:46

Sutter: Well I just felt we were losing a lot of open space, and open space is important. I grew up in California, in Oakland, actually, and I saw a lot of open space disappear. I thought we were losing an important asset. Housing is important, but so is open space, and I was not really happy with a lot of the housing that was going up in this area. Shoddy, I thought. Anyway, that was kind of it. It was kind of a natural for me.

01-00:05:38

Farrell: How did you get involved with the park district's board?

01-00:05:46

Sutter: Well, I had been involved in a lot of conservation issues, including some that I have mentioned. Susan Smartt, who was on the board, was retiring. She was involved with a group of people who were trying to find a substitute for her. This group decided that she should ask me. She did, and I agreed. I ran and was elected.

01-00:06:26

Farrell: Do you remember the early days of your board membership, what that was like, or maybe what some of the issues the board was concerned with then?

[Section removed by narrator.]

01-00:07:09

Sutter: Yeah, one of the issues was, the park district was being sued. Plaintiffs alleged that it was being sued on an issue of pollution that we had sort of polluted, trying to remember where, somewhere along the Bay.

01-00:07:41

Farrell: Was that in Oakland along the Oakland shoreline?

01-00:07:44

Sutter: No, it was I think in maybe San Leandro. Anyway, I felt that our staff was being too good to these plaintiffs, and that we should just fight this thing, and that's what we did and actually won. That was a long process. That was one of the first issues I was involved with. I can't remember all the issues, but that was one I was particularly involved in.

01-00:08:24

Farrell: You also were involved with the Citizens for Regional Recreation and Parks, you were a founding member and president. Can you tell me a little bit about that?

01-00:08:33

Sutter:

Yes, that was an outcome of the fight in Contra Costa County about the area, San Pablo Dam area. There were people who were involved in that, and I was one of them. As a result of the campaign, we had gotten some publicity and I guess in *The [San Francisco] Chronicle*, and we were contacted by Dorothy Erskine. Dorothy Erskine was very active in various activities in San Francisco. She invited us over to her house, us being some of the people who had been the leaders in that fight, including Jack Kent. She had known Jack Kent. He had been the planning director of San Francisco at one time. He was on staff, well he was the Professor of City and Regional Planning at UC Berkeley. A number of us who had been involved in the campaign about the park came over to meet with Dorothy, and that was kind of the nucleus of what started Citizens for Regional Recreation and Parks. Actually, Dorothy kind of ran the thing. I was at one time the president for quite a while, but Dorothy really ran it. She was wonderful.

01-00:10:22

Farrell:

Can you tell me a little bit more about working with Dorothy, and maybe what some of the things you learned from her, or she brought to those efforts?

01-00:10:31

Sutter:

Well, she was very well-organized. She was very diligent, hard-working, and we all respected her. She has now been named the founder of that organization. She was remarkable.

01-00:10:57

Farrell:

Another project that you worked on during your involvement with the district was the Bay Trail, and that came out of Oakland Measure DD for funding parts of the trail that were incomplete. Can you tell me a little bit about your involvement on Measure DD?

01-00:11:17

Sutter:

Yes. There had been several bond issues. The first one was Measure K, and that was a park bond issue. At my request, they put money in there for the shoreline. I wanted the city to acquire the area north of the Bay Bridge, the Emeryville Crescent, because I was worried about what the Port of Oakland wanted to do with that area. That was my idea, but then they put money in the bond issue, and then, but they used it for something else. They ended up using it to build the Jack London Aquatic Center, which was all right, that was a good project. Anyway, that was Measure K.

01-00:12:15

And then, Measure DD was later on, and I was on the committee that dealt with drafting Measure DD, and I went to a lot of meetings about it. That was Danny Wan's project; he was on the city council. It was a citywide thing; it wasn't just, I'm trying to remember, Measure DD, I think it was citywide, yes, included areas other than the shoreline. But they did put money in it for the shoreline, and of course I followed how they spent the money.

01-00:13:02

Farrell: That was to complete the [San Francisco] Bay Trail, was that correct?

01-00:13:07

Sutter: Well, complete the Oakland part of the Bay Trail.

01-00:13:11

Farrell: Do you remember, I guess, how it was disjointed, or how it was working then, and why it hadn't been complete before that?

01-00:13:29

Sutter: Well, I think a lot of things get down to money and priorities. The Bay Trail was a Bay-wide project, and different areas progressed at different rates. There was a committee that talked about the Oakland area. I attended a few of their meetings. That was before Measure DD. When Measure DD was put together, everybody who wanted some kind of park thing threw their hat in the ring, and that's what it ended up being.

01-00:14:14

Farrell: Another project that you worked on was the Ninth Ave Terminal. Basically, some people tried to retain the terminal before a developer tried to demolish it, and you were involved with the design following the demolition through the DD advisory council committee. Can you tell me a little bit about your work on that?

01-00:14:41

Sutter: Yes. That was a really a project of Oakland Heritage Alliance. They were interested in the historical aspect, and I was kind of tagging along with their project, and they were helping us with the park project. I wanted more parkland along Bay shoreline, so we worked together. Then, I don't know if it [the Terminal] has been demolished. That was the plan to demolish it, maybe it has been. Anyway, the question came up, what do you do with that area afterwards? There was a lot of discussion about that, and the design and so forth. I'm trying to remember more about it. Finally, the developer, Signature Properties, changed the developer, and that was a great improvement.

01-00:15:06

Farrell: I definitely want to talk about the Judge John Sutter Regional Shoreline, but before we get to that, I'm wondering if you could tell me a little bit about your wife, Ellie, and maybe about how you met, and how she's helped support some of these projects throughout the years?

01-00:16:26

Sutter: Well Ellie was always very supportive, when we met at Stanford, at a mixer at Stanford. She was a student getting a degree, a master's in art education, and I was in law school. So, we started dating then. Was kind of off-and-on, went on for quite a few, for about four years, and we finally got married. And yeah, she was very supportive. I think a lot of wives would have gotten very tired of my going to meetings all the time. But anyway, she was very supportive and very helpful. She had her own activities, she was active. She was the president

of the Oakland YWCA [Young Women's Christian Association] in the '70s, and she was very active in an organization called the Center for Human Development, that is interested in education. She was on their board for a number of years. She had a program in the Oakland schools for trying to let junior high school kids have a time to talk and recesses and so forth, with parental guidance. She was involved with a lot of activities. She never got in the way, and she was always helpful. She went to a lot of the meetings, and I was, I'm very appreciative of that.

01-00:18:23

Farrell: What year did you get married?

01-00:18:26

Sutter: 1956.

01-00:18:29

Farrell: I know that you have some children, and I'm wondering if when, as you were raising them, if you would bring them to the parks, and if you would spend time outside with them? And if that was important to both you and Ellie?

01-00:18:45

Sutter: Well, we did to a certain extent, different things with different kids. My oldest daughter, Susie, was pretty independent. Of course, we did family things, we had family vacations. My middle daughter, Maria, we did things together. I remember going to beaches together, and she enjoyed that; I enjoyed being with her. My youngest daughter, Sally, we took a lot of walks together, specifically in the outdoors. Well, we went up to the Oakland camp as a family, so we did that together. I would take Sally to the zoo a lot too, she enjoyed that. I went out, we did expose them to the outdoors.

01-00:20:03

Farrell: Does Ellie share your interest in environmental conservation and open space?

01-00:20:10

Sutter: Well, to a certain extent, yes.

01-00:20:16

Farrell: Okay, so I do want to talk about the park that was just named in your honor. It's a twenty-two-and-a-half-acre park located along Oakland's waterfront at the foot of the eastern span of the bridge. Can you tell me a little bit about the history of that site?

01-00:20:40

Sutter: Well, yes. Of course, I was familiar with the site. I had, when I was president of Citizens for Regional Recreation and Parks, later called People for Open Space, the ABAG [Association of Bay Area Governments] was preparing a plan for the Bay Area, a regional plan. I thought the regional plan should have something in it about the shoreline. Now I had been on the BCDC [Bay Conservation Development & Commission] for two years, from '65 to '67. I was generally familiar with, and we had studies of various aspects of the Bay

that were prepared by the staff. Of course, I read those studies and I thought, well, ABAG is having this plan and they better pay attention to the shoreline. So I suggested that our organization review the Bay and send a letter to ABAG with suggestions. I handled the part about Northern Alameda County. I guess the main point I made in that letter was San Leandro Bay and we should have a park out there, what now became Martin Luther King Park [Martin Luther King Jr. Regional Shoreline]. But it also talks about other parks, and part of it was this area which ultimately became, is becoming parkland.

01-00:22:34

I knew the area because, I knew the general area of the shoreline because when I was a kid, we used to go down and fly model airplanes there. Mine usually cracked up, my brother's were pretty good. My brother and I would go down there a lot. I worked at the Oakland Army Base when I was fifteen years old. I did that during, that was during the war, and so I knew the area. I don't think we could go down to the water though; I think that was off-limits. And then of course, the Bay Bridge, we were on the Bay Bridge all the time. I knew the general area, and I had maps which showed that there was a Bay sort of out there. The letter was written, and the part I wrote said that we should reserve, if the Oakland Army Base ever left, we should reserve that area, that should become parkland.

01-00:23:56

And then, in 1968, I got elected to the park board [East Bay Regional Park District Board of Directors]. One of the first things I did was talk to Doug Siden, who was the board chair, and told him I thought we ought to approach the management of the park district to urge them to proceed with this idea. Doug was very supportive. Doug represented part of Oakland, as well as Alameda. Doug and I set up a meeting with Pat O'Brien, who at that time was the general manager, and we explained the project. I did most of the explaining, and Pat was very receptive. In fact, he was enthusiastic. And Bob Doyle was in the meeting. He was then the assistant general manager for land acquisitions. The park district had been through dealing with the federal government with excess land in Alameda, Alameda Naval Air Station, so they knew who to deal with in the feds. Doyle urged Pat to get right on it. No, not Doyle. Pat urged Doyle to get right on it, and he did, and within a matter of about a month, they had at least a verbal commitment from the National Park Service.

[Section removed by narrator.]

Interview 2: November 23, 2020

02-00:00:09

Farrell:

All right, this is Shanna Farrell back with Judge John Sutter on Monday, November 23, 2020. This is an interview for the East Bay Regional Park District Parkland Oral History Project, and we are doing the interview remotely over Zoom. John, when we left off on Friday, we were talking about how you first became interested in the area of Oakland that eventually became a park named after you. Could you describe the area of the shoreline, maybe some of the sights and the sounds, and maybe the smells that you remember from that area?

02-00:00:50

Sutter:

Well, of course I was interested in the whole Oakland shoreline, not just this part of it, and I had been involved in trying to create parks elsewhere in the shoreline, and I did that after this period also. I was familiar with the site, and I had come down and visited the site shortly after I was elected to the board, and that was in 1996, I guess, and several people who were quite familiar with the area wanted me to see it. They wanted me to see other sites along the shoreline which could be developed for public use. We had a tour, and the people on the tour were Richard Winnie and Sandy Threlfall [representing Waterfront Action and League of Women Voters], and Richard drove, and we went into the area of this park. At that time the military was still there, but Winnie was a pretty fast driver, and he just went all by the military posts, and there was no one there, no one to stop him, and we went down to the area where, right on the water where the park is located. That was the first time I really had seen it up close, close hand. I think I told you the rest of it, when I got on the board, I talked to Pat O'Brien about it, et cetera.

02-00:02:48

Farrell:

Why did you feel like the shoreline mattered to preserve? What was it about it that you wanted to keep open and accessible to the public?

02-00:02:59

Sutter:

Well, I think that's one of the prime pluses of Oakland, as it is for many communities, and many communities develop their shoreline. Take Chicago, for example, they have a wonderful shoreline park right along Lake Michigan, and they've developed it very nicely. Oakland had sort of ignored the shoreline, and we had, I think something like nineteen miles of shoreline, and there were only a few hundred feet of public access, mostly at Jack London Square, and I thought, there was also a study by the League of Women Voters, Richard Winnie had written the study, and that study emphasized the fact that there was very little public access. Really, the whole port had been sort of cut off from the public, mostly for commercial use. Many of those commercial uses were no longer needed. Anyway, there were others who were interested in developing the shoreline, and I sort of followed their lead.

02-00:04:20

Farrell: What did you have in mind for the shoreline? What kind of park did you envision?

02-00:04:25

Sutter: Well, I envisioned a park which focused on the water, and people being able to have a trail around the water, and enjoying the wildlife, enjoying the views, wonderful views of San Francisco. Also there's wildlife in the water. There's a lot of fish and interesting other sea life, and I thought people would be interested in that. Maybe a fishing pier. That was the kind of thing I was thinking. I was thinking of it as kind of an amenity for the city.

02-00:05:12

Farrell: I know you described the process a little bit of when you proposed it in 1967, 1968, [then] talking with Pat O'Brien and the board [in the 1990s. Pat O'Brien was general manager of the Park District from 1988 to 2009].

02-00:05:23

Sutter: That would be the '60s. We're in the '60s, not the '50s.

02-00:05:30

Farrell: Okay, yes, so in the '60s, the late '60s. Do you remember what the process was like for you to propose this as a potential park site?

02-00:05:42

Sutter: Well, I was a member of the board [beginning in 1996]. There's only seven people on the board, so in a way, I was Pat's boss, or one of his bosses. Before talking to Pat, I talked to Doug Siden, who was the chair of the board, and he also represented part of Oakland, and I told him about the proposed project, and he was very positive about it. Doug and I went in together and talked to Pat about it, and then Pat asked his people to get on it, and they did, and as I said, within like six weeks, or a month, we had a commitment from the National Parks Service for a public benefit conveyance from the federal government. They had already announced that they were going to abandon the Oakland Army Base.

02-00:06:41

Farrell: Essentially, you had to wait for the site to close until it was decommissioned, and completely shut in 1999. Were there any efforts between the late '60s and the late '90s to develop the park site at all?

02-00:07:01

Sutter: I don't think so. There was a period there where not much was going on. Well, what was going on is, we were going back to Washington to make sure this thing was going to go ahead. I talked to people—well not only me, but others in the park district talked to people in the various government agencies to try to make sure it was moving along.

02-00:07:29

Farrell: Do you remember who those people were, or which agencies that you were meeting with in Washington?

02-00:07:36

Sutter: Yes, we worked, well I'm sure that Pat O'Brien went back a number of times, and his successor also went back, and I went back and we would meet in Washington often anyway, and we have various board members back there. We would take advantage of it. We talked to people in the National Park Service. We talked to people in the Corps of Engineers and others. I can't remember all the people we talked to. There were various problems that had to be worked out. A lot of them were worked out.

02-00:08:26

Farrell: What were some of those problems?

02-00:08:32

Sutter: Well, pollution was a problem. Who paid for cleaning up the pollution, and when, when would that take place. There was no funding for cleanup. There's still some pollution there that needs to be cleaned up. That was a problem. I kept trying to remember, there were others. Part of it was just staying through the government bureaucracy and getting it done. I'm sure there were other issues too.

02-00:09:08

Farrell: Did you find that people in Washington and the federal government were supportive of after the army base was decommissioned, for it to be turned over into a park?

02-00:09:20

Sutter: Well by the time I got there, there'd already been a commitment for a government conveyance, which means our agency got the property free from the federal government. So that was already done. I didn't detect any resistance to it.

02-00:09:41

Farrell: How about the fact that you were a local elected official for the city of Oakland, how do you feel like that helped with this effort?

02-00:09:52

Sutter: Well, I think it helped in a number of ways. Of course, I was not on the city council at the time this happened. I was on the park board. But, we needed support from the city, and at least they didn't oppose it. We were more worried about the Port of Oakland, which is a separate entity, sort of a city within a city, and they didn't really oppose it either.

02-00:10:29

Farrell: Who were some of the other local elected officials that you were working with during this, like thirty-year period, either in the late '60s, or throughout those thirty years?

02-00:10:43

Sutter:

Oh, there were a great many people I was working with. I did help, I did work with the park district staff with respect to another project down there, the Oakland airport. We went to quite a few meetings and tried to get them to be supportive. Eventually, now we have Martin Luther King Jr. Regional Shoreline, which is a result of that effort. But other people too, there were non-elected people also, were involved then. Well, we dealt with a whole lot of people. I can't remember all the people that we dealt with. I certainly dealt with other people on the city council, the city manager. Others, the mayor, who was not cooperative, Mayor [John H.] Reading was kind of opposed to parks. [laughter] Just many other people. Plenty of regional officials too. MTC, Metropolitan Transportation Commission, was very helpful in funneling money into this project, so I talked to some of those people.

02-00:12:12

Farrell:

How did that work? How were they allotting money for this project? Were they doing it through measures, or local elections, or through donors, or taxes?

02-00:12:25

Sutter:

Of course, we got the land from the federal government, we talked about that. There was some money from the—several bond issues. Measure K, which was the first one, and Measure DD, those were local bond issues. I was involved in putting together both of those bond issues. Measure DD had a provision in it that provided money for building the Bay Trail, and that, is partially built with that money. Measure K had money, I put money in it, with the idea of the city acquiring the northern shore, or what they call Radio Beach, the northern shore above of the north side of the Bay Bridge. That was my idea, but it turns out, they used that money for something else. They used that money to build the Jack London Aquatic Center. Anyway, I had my eye on the shoreline for a long time.

02-00:13:54

Farrell:

In your experience, I know that you had to wait because you had the commitment from the federal government to hand the land over, and you had to wait about thirty years for the base to be decommissioned and closed, but in your experience—

02-00:14:10

Sutter:

The base decommission thing, that was kind of newsworthy in the late '60s that that was going to happen, and that's when I wrote that if the federal government gives up that property, it should be turned into a park. That was about 1967.

02-00:14:33

Farrell:

Okay, okay. So in your experience, how long does it usually take for a piece of land to be proposed as a park, and then for all, the entire process to go through to when it actually opens? Is there like a range, or a pretty typical amount of time that usually takes?

02-00:14:57

Sutter: I wouldn't be able to answer that. You would want to talk to somebody in one of the park departments. It would vary tremendously with the various projects. Some get started and move right along, and there's bond issue to acquire the property, usually. And some take years. [laughter] Some are properties acquired over time, you get part of it at one year, and part of it many years later, maybe.

02-00:15:37

Farrell: So no two parks created the same?

02-00:15:40

Sutter: That's right.

02-00:15:42

Farrell: Now the new shoreline park is located at the eastern touchdown of the Bay Bridge and it has view of the entire Bay Bridge and the eastern Bay Bridge span. It's a newly-renovated, 24,000 square foot Bridge Yard [building], which will, in post pandemic times, will be available for future public events. There's a walking trail, there's a 600-foot observation pier, there's improved parking and biking and pedestrian access across the Bay Bridge, and to the touchdown bridge with Treasure Island, and so this park was named for you on October 21st, 2020, so just about a month ago. What did that mean to you to have that park named in your honor?

02-00:16:32

Sutter: Oh, it was wonderful. I'm certainly happy to see that happen. Actually, the park district board had made that decision about a year earlier. But anyway, I was really pleased by it, and of course, I had spent a lot of time on it, and I thought it was wonderful. When they had the inauguration of it, people said very honest things, I was very flattered by the comments people made, very nice comments.

02-00:17:08

Farrell: Were you watching the dedication ceremony virtually?

02-00:17:13

Sutter: After the fact, yes.

02-00:17:15

Farrell: Okay. Yes, what was it like for you to watch that? I know it was about an hour long, and there were various speakers, but yes, what did it feel like for you?

02-00:17:24

Sutter: Really nice. Really flattering, actually. It was very nice comments.

02-00:17:30

Farrell: When you found out about a year ago that they were going to name it in your honor, do you remember, I guess, getting the news, and what that was like for you when you first heard?

02-00:17:44

Sutter:

Well I had been told by some staff people that this was in the works, the staff people on the park district. And then there was, it was an agenda item on one of the meetings, and I went to that meeting, and then people said nice things there too. That was a very, very upbeat meeting for me.

02-00:18:11

Farrell:

How do you hope that that park is used? How do you hope it develops, how do you hope people use it? How do you hope it becomes a part of Oakland?

02-00:18:26

Sutter:

Well I hope it's well-used, and people, it's a little bit hard to find, but hopefully that will be improved. I think the pier will provide an interesting site for people to visit in Oakland, and I just hope it's used a lot. I hope people enjoy the hiking; I'm sure a lot of hikers will come out to go across the bridge, and cyclists, also. Especially if the cycle path ever gets completed to San Francisco.

02-00:19:07

Farrell:

Yeah, that would be quite nice. What has it meant to you to have such a long relationship with the park district?

02-00:19:19

Sutter:

Well, it's been a good relationship, and I have enjoyed it. They haven't always agreed with me, but it's been a good agency to work with, and they have their sympathies in the right place. I think it's a great agency.

02-00:19:41

Farrell:

How do you hope, or what are your hopes for the future of the district, and for open space in the East Bay?

02-00:19:52

Sutter:

Well I hope they can continue doing what they're doing. I hope that they have the funds to do the things they need to do. There's still quite a bit of open space that needs development in the East Bay, and, for acquisition and development, and I hope they continue doing what they're doing. I think they will. Part of it depends on funding.

02-00:20:22

Farrell:

Yes. Are there any other pieces of land that you would like to see developed into parks?

02-00:20:32

Sutter:

Oh yeah, sure. Point Molate would be the first one that pops into my mind. That's in Richmond; it's on the shoreline in Richmond. There are people working on that. There are also people in the City of Richmond who are opposing it. [laughter] We'll see what happens with that. That would be my first priority.

02-00:20:59

Farrell: How do you hope people remember your work and your legacy with the district?

02-00:21:08

Sutter: Well, I just hope those that know remember, or find out. I can't say anything beyond that, really.

02-00:21:24

Farrell: I'm wondering if there's anything else that you'd like to talk about or reflect on, or if there's anything that I haven't asked you about that feels important to include?

02-00:21:39

Sutter: Well, I think it's important that people want parks and are able to pay for them, and get them done. Not just parks, but open space generally. It usually takes governmental action. It takes people to be able to deal with the local government, and regional governments, and there are people like that, and those people need encouragement.

02-00:22:13

Farrell: In terms of the projects that you've worked on, is there anything else that you want to talk about, or you want to cover that we didn't talk about?

02-00:22:26

Sutter: Well, I've worked on a lot of things. The other one I worked a lot on was the Martin Luther King Park [Martin Luther King Jr. Regional Shoreline], and I didn't start that, I joined others who were working on that. And that, by the way, was kind of a fight with the Division of Highways. Because the question was, park or part of a freeway. I dealt a lot with Fred Cooper, particularly on that issue. He was the county supervisor. I dealt quite a bit with, I'm not good on names. The name escapes me. I was thinking some of the members of the city council were supportive, some were not, and I appreciated the help of the city council. There were a lot of people.

02-00:23:29

Farrell: Is there anything specifically that you want to talk about in terms of Martin Luther King Park?

02-00:23:37

Sutter: No again, I think it's a great asset for an area that's not very well served with parks, and I'm happy to see it being used. And I think the park district's done a good job of developing it.

02-00:24:00

Farrell: Well yeah, is there anything else that we didn't talk about? I know, I'm not sure that we talked about the Crowley property.

02-00:24:11

Sutter: Yes, we did, we should talk about that.

02-00:24:17

Farrell: Yeah, can you tell me a little bit about that property, and your involvement with it?

02-00:24:22

Sutter: Yeah. I felt that the Crowley property needed sort of a rest stop for the hikers, a good place for hikers to take a rest. Not only that, it's right next to a major road, and it would be scenic; it was developed, it's going to be a scenic project. I almost, though, felt that it would be, it should be developed attractively because it's visible from various important places in Oakland. If you come down on 14th Avenue, for example, from Highland Hospital, you have a good view of that area. But now you're just seeing an undeveloped, uninteresting property. If you're driving right by the street out there, same thing. You're not seeing much of anything there. I felt it was an opportunity to provide an amenity to an area that was without an amenity. Actually, I donated some money to the park district to develop it, after talking with [the Park District's General Manager] Bob Doyle. I donated about a million dollars, which has been set aside for developing that. Now the park district will have to supplement that with other funds. Anyway, that was my involvement there.

02-00:26:19

Farrell: So that's going to be an ongoing project?

02-00:26:22

Sutter: Yes.

02-00:26:23

Farrell: Okay, and you were working with Carol Johnson [the Park District's Assistant General Manager of Public Affairs and Executive Director of the Regional Parks Foundation]?

02-00:26:27

Sutter: Yeah.

02-00:26:28

Farrell: Okay. How has it been working with her?

02-00:26:31

Sutter: Really good. That department's been very helpful.

02-00:26:36

Farrell: You feel like they are supportive and they share your vision for that? That's good, yeah. Let's see. I think we talked about that Gateway Park development?

02-00:26:52

Sutter: Well that's the same thing, as the new park. That's what we called it before it got my moniker.

02-00:27:04

Farrell: Okay, gotcha, okay. Yeah, so I think that that might be all of the questions that I have for you, unless you want to add anything else?

02-00:17:19

Sutter: No, I think that perhaps too much attention is focused on me. A lot of people were involved in all these projects. They don't just happen because of one person, and I wanted to thank all the people who were involved. I want to thank the League of Women Voters. I think their study was important, and got people interested in the waterfront, and trying to see what we could do to improve it. There's a lot of people involved, and a lot of good people put a lot of work in it. The Metropolitan Transportation Commission was also very important in all of this. There were people on that commission who were very supportive, and provided a lot of the funding that was needed. A lot of that was highway funding, which may seem kind of ironic, because highways are often kind of the enemy of open space. But anyway, in this case, we had a lot of support from a lot of agencies, federal, state, and local.

02-00:28:43

Farrell: That's great. What do you hope people learn from collaborative team efforts like that

02-00:28:52

Sutter: Well I hope they're duplicated where it's appropriate. This of course, this was an agency, this was something which invited cooperation because there's so many agencies involved. You had the bridge people who were building their new bridge. You had the park people. You had the various federal and state agencies that were committed to doing something out there. We had other sort of volunteer things. For example, the Bridge Yard [building] was not something I envisioned. That was something the state came up with. They were remodeling that building, and they thought oh well, why don't we put it in with the park, and they did. It's part of the park. The park district is operating that building under a lease, so various things sort of came together, some of which were quite unexpected.

02-00:30:13

Farrell: Well that's fantastic. And yeah, very hopeful that people are using the park in your name, and the ways that you had envisioned, and even when I drive across the Bay Bridge, I see people using that parkway. Well thank you so much for your time, and all of your contributions, and for doing this interview too.

02-00:30:46

Sutter: Well thank you, I appreciate your interest and your questions.

[End of Interview]