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Friday Apr 4

Let voters weigh open space protection

Guest Opinion

By **Ralph Nobles**

A generation ago, I helped found the Friends of Redwood City, a citizens' group organized in 1982 to stop development on Bair Island. Today, our Redwood City open spaces, including sensitive baylands, are again under threat from inappropriate development. Open space lands and parks are needed to provide recreation for our growing community. Baylands also provide protection from sea-level-rise flooding, fight global warming and provide vital habitat for endangered wildlife. Now, with the Open Space Vote measure, we have a chance to protect our precious remaining open space - before it's too late.

The Open Space Vote charter amendment will give all Redwood City residents the right to vote on any zoning change or development proposed for existing open space or parks in the city. This measure will ensure that the Redwood City community has a permanent voice in protecting the city's limited open space lands. A vote is required only for a change from open space uses - building or expanding public recreation facilities on open space and parks won't require a vote.

The Open Space Vote is sponsored by the Open Space Vote Coalition, a partnership of Friends of Redwood City and Save the Bay, with enthusiastic support from the Sequoia Audubon Society, the Committee for Green Foothills and the Citizens Committee to Complete the Refuge. This coalition reflects the importance of these lands to both Redwood City residents, as well as regionally to the entire Bay Area.

Open space lands deserve the strongest possible protection, because once they are destroyed, they are gone forever. As you know, it takes a two-thirds vote to fund our open space and parks, so there should be an equally high standard to destroy them forever. That is why the Open Space Vote measure requires a two-thirds majority of Redwood City voters to approve zoning changes for development on these lands - to protect open space lands for the community.

Currently, the largest threatened open space in Redwood City is the 1,433-acre retired salt pond site owned by Minnesota-based agribusiness Cargill. The existing "tidal plain" zoning on this site does not allow development. Before salt was ever harvested here, this site was thriving Bay habitat. Now that Cargill is done making salt, the site should be restored to natural healthy wetlands to provide recreation for residents and vital habitat for fish and wildlife, as it once did. San Francisco Bay is the most economically valuable natural resource of the Bay Area, and wetlands are vital to its health. Filling and paving over these former wetlands would be a major step backward to the era when developers filled in the Bay without limit or regulation.

In 1982, Redwood City residents stopped development of Bair Island by a margin of fewer than 50 votes citywide. Today Bair Island is part of the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge and is being restored to tidal wetlands. It includes public access amenities such as the Bay Trail, wildlife viewing platforms and public parking. Redwood City residents are benefiting from this restoration. Moreover, both the land purchase and the restoration are being paid for with private, state and federal funds.

With threats of development on open space looming, I urge all Redwood City

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residents to support the Open Space Vote measure. Let's give residents the right to vote on important changes on our open space lands. We need 15 percent of Redwood City registered voters to sign the petition for the Open Space Vote measure to be placed on the November ballot. I invite you to join the campaign to protect Redwood City's remaining open spaces, especially our valuable baylands, just as we saved Bair Island in 1982. Go to www.redwoodcityopenspace.org or call 650- 365-8326 for more information.

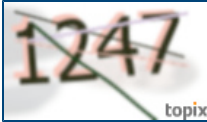
Ralph Nobles is a former Redwood City and San Mateo County planning commissioner and a founding member of Friends of Redwood City and Save The Bay.

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