

Long battle for coastal acreage ends

66-acre Porter-Sesnon parcel will link New Brighton, Seacliff state beaches

BY PAUL ROGERS
Mercury News Staff Writer

The Porter-Sesnon property, 66 acres of coastal bluffs and beaches where Santa Cruz County residents defeated plans for the Wingspread hotel and conference center in 1988, officially became a public park Wednesday.

Escrow closed on a \$3.5 million purchase agreement between the state and the University of California, brokered by state Sen. Henry Mello, D-Watsonville.

Under the deal, the land will become part of New Brighton State Beach, connecting New Brighton with Seacliff State Beach.

Also included in the purchase was the Wydera property, an adjacent nine acres of undeveloped land.

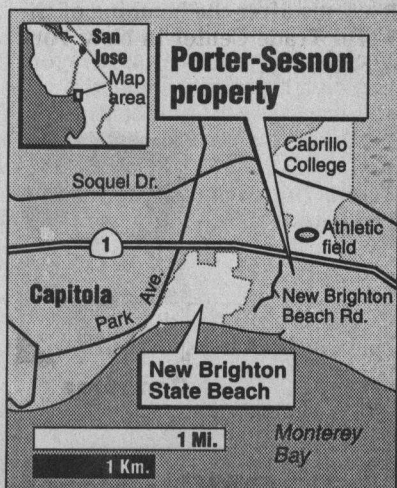
"It's a real opportunity for our community and the state of California," said Vickie Powell-Murray, a spokeswoman for the Friends of Porter-Sesnon.

Facilities such as campsites, roads or bathrooms will not be built in the park for several years, said George Cook, superintendent of the Santa Cruz district of the state Department of Parks and Recreation.

Public hearings will be held to decide improvements over the next two years.

"It's just going to be open land for some time," Cook said.

Battles over the property began in 1979, when Palo Alto developer Ryland Kelley acquired a 99-year lease from the UC regents, who owned it. By the mid-1980s, Kelley had plans to build a 585-room hotel on the land, on the coastal bluffs across Highway 1 from Cabrillo College. His plans also included a performing arts center and a conference center.



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But the project, known as Wingspread, was shot down by Santa Cruz County voters in 1988 after it had received narrow approval from the board of supervisors. Kelley later filed for bankruptcy.

First Interstate Bank of Los Angeles foreclosed on the lease to Porter-Sesnon and on the title to the Wydera property.

The \$3.5 million purchase price came from several sources. In July, Mello obtained \$2 million from the state budget, a move criticized by some as pork barrel politics in a time of severe budget cuts. In September, Gov. Pete Wilson signed a Mello bill allowing the use of an additional \$1 million in existing park bond funds. The state Department of Parks and Recreation funded the remaining \$500,000.

"Sometimes in life, a goal is so important that we have a moral obligation to take on the most uphill fight, even when the odds of winning are stacked against us," Mello said in a statement.