

A group of ordinary citizens mount what was the City's greatest grass roots campaign, carry an initiative by 68%, and save Lighthouse Field from the developers. The question is, what comes after Salvation?

The Save Lighthouse Field Association (SLFA), with its customary thoroughness, had made sure that every public body with any clout—from the City Council to the Coastal Commission and the State Parks Department—recommended that the best use of Lighthouse Field was as open space in public ownership. The next step was to find the money to ransom it from the developers and, accordingly, proposals were made to include the field in a state open space acquisition grant.

SLFA members, worn out from their supreme effort and feeling that this was the time for more formal and official action, forced the City Council and the Board of Supervisors to take charge of the project. This was, in the innocence of the time, thought to be a victory.

A joint committee—the Lighthouse Field Committee (LFC) was formed by the City and County to steer the proposal through Sacramento's maze of committees, commissions, boards and lobbies. During the next seven years there was plenty going on but no one knew for sure just what. One week the approval of the Red Queen was needed, then a "yes" vote from the Mad Hatter or an OK from the Duchess who, of course, had to be approached through the Caterpillar. Interest and committee attendance dropped until quorums were rare and remarkable occurrences. (LFC Chairman Robert Bell allowed this lack of attendance to continue until just recently when, after much criticism, Board and Council members wrote their appointees asking that they either attend or resign.)

This mysterious and murky atmosphere was unaccustomed territory for SLFA members, who had never had a meeting that was not open to the press or at which anyone present wasn't entitled to a voice and a vote. (These and other

charmingly naive policies attracted the attention of usually cynical *Sentinel* reporter Bill Neubauer and the SLFA found itself occupying ample space in the hitherto inaccessible pages of the local bastion of Republican business interests. Of such things are political victories made...if you have enough of them.)

If the old SLFA had no secrets, the new "public" Lighthouse Field Committee was a different matter. Chairman Robert Bell was determined to run a tight ship. Enmeshed in the conspiracies and suspicions of Sacramento, the Committee began to resemble a CIA operation. Even members who had belonged to the SLFA adopted the new mysteriousness. Members occasionally hinted that secret negotiations were taking place, that a "high-powered" lobbyist had been hired.

Even those of us with friends on the Committee and a once fierce interest in "our Field" eventually relegated the issue to that back part of the mind that waits for impossible things. We never lost hope. Somehow we knew that someday the Meek would inherit the rest of the World and that the following day we would get the field.

Meanwhile, the Field itself continued to deteriorate. The LFC, engrossed in its negotiations, forgot what it was negotiating for. The Field continued to be a parking lot for tourists, a testing-ground for four-wheel-drive vehicles, a place to change your oil and dump your beer cans. The soil under many trees was—and still is—compacted from the weight of automobiles and many of the trees themselves were—and still are—diseased and dying. After much prodding from Ed Porter (a neighbor and friend of the Field) and the Citizens Committee on Community Improvement, the Lighthouse Field Committee finally acted to construct a barrier-berm around the Field to prevent vehicular access. This grudging effort was, in seven long years, the only instance of concern by LFC for the Field itself.

A tight ship isn't always the swiftest. It was years before the

# Lighthouse Field: A Fine and Public Place

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proposal reached the Senate Appropriations Committee and Henry Mello, after much hem-ing and haw-ing, finally cast the deciding vote. (Old Henry was trying to make political hay out of a Field that grows only weeds and wildflowers. He wanted us to be grateful to him for the work we'd done ourselves.)

At last dawn was breaking on the "dark ages." In mid-1981 the announcement came that the state had bought Lighthouse Field and designated it as a State Beach; that the City and County would share in development costs and be primarily responsible for design; and that the City would be responsible for maintenance. Soon after it was announced that LFC had hired a consultant from San Francisco to run public workshops for the planning of the Field. Another stage had been reached. Another victory, perhaps, but it is a fact that the more "official" the battle became, the farther it seemed from the original exuberant citizen's movement, the less fun it became, and the less efficient and more confused. Something had been lost in the process.

Sometime after the original initiative victory in 1974, a small

group from the SLFA made a pilgrimage to the San Francisco offices of the Trust for Public Land, a statewide organization of experts on public land acquisition, for advice. We announced ourselves and waited, coonskin hat in hands, shuffling our Birkenstocks, feeling like hicks from the hinterlands. Our nervousness increased when we realized that people were coming out from the back offices to get a look at us.

"Advice?" said the man who finally talked to us. "From us? We've been studying and learning from what you've done in Santa Cruz. You're as much the experts as we are. That's why everyone's staring...don't you people realize you're celebrities?"

Back on the local front, Santa Cruz has a way of forgetting its heroes. Lighthouse Field Committee Chairman Bell, who lived over the hill in the days of the SLFA, once remarked that we owed the Field not a scruffy bunch of citizens but to Henry Mello's vote on the Appropriations Committee. Mr. Bell, like most small fry dealing with large bureaucracies, makes the mistake of thinking that political power comes only from above.

At the first public workshop, during a preliminary discussion, John Scott—the surfer who started the whole thing when he sold his car to pay for a newspaper ad

pleading that the Field be saved—interrupted to ask that the first priority be given to the Field itself, to the immediate rescue of dying trees and compacted soil. The consultant, who is paid to be patient, ignored Scott and merely recognized someone else whose hand was up. The moment passed. Later, at a meeting of the Lighthouse Field Committee, Chairman Bell commented that the consultant and the process shouldn't have to put up with "kooks" like Scott. He was unaware of who Scott was...and unimpressed when told. Scott did, of course, speak out of turn and out of context; but then, it seems to be the nature of heroes, large and small, to be out of context and against the grain.

The initial decision to hire a consultant was not a universally popular one. Several members of the LFC objected that it was an embarrassing waste of money for the City to hire someone from San Francisco to ask citizens of Santa Cruz what they wanted done with Lighthouse Field. They protested that LFC itself should run the workshops with help from City staff, contracting out for technical assistance as needed (as the consultant himself later did). City staff demurred, claiming they were incapable of running such a process. Some LFC members began to think it might be wise to hire an





PHOTO: ED PORTER

outsider to handle what could become a controversial undertaking.

In due course, the decision was made to hire a professional. It seems that the mentality that sees political power as coming from above, sees nothing but trouble from "below" and feels the need to protect itself—"cover your ass" is the popular phrase—and a consultant from San Francisco was hired to stand up in front of Santa Cruzans and take any heat that might otherwise be directed at LFC or its staff.

It should be made clear that the consultant was hired solely to run the workshop process and draw up the results. The basic contract was for three meetings at a cost of \$47,000. Extra meetings (such as the one coming up on June 3) are extra; and meetings of the Lighthouse Field Committee that the consultant must attend are also extra; as were the expensive but confusing flyers distributed recently in the *Sentinel*. It is not hard to imagine that, at the current rate, the cost is likely to reach \$75,000 before any real designing is done.

The public process began with the distribution of questionnaires, of which over 600 were returned. The so-called "planning sessions" began on October 17, 1981 with a walk on the Field in the morning and a meeting that afternoon at the Santa

Cruz High School cafeteria. Seventy-one participants were divided into groups of six or seven and asked to answer such questions as "If Senator Phelan (who once owned the Field) returned to Santa Cruz, how would you welcome him?" A few tables were allowed to wrestle with more substantial problems such as what to do with West Cliff Drive. But the time allotted was too short for the difficult problems and too long for the silly ones, and if you happened to be in a minority at your table, you went unheard since there was no opportunity to address the group as a whole.

The second meeting was a three-hour nighttime meeting at which the consultant used up a large portion of time reviewing the first workshop before he presented us with his notions of our opinions in the form of three options. Participants were then asked to vote on various features from these options and a kind of mishmash design was tentatively arrived at. One participant (obviously someone who had been there before) asked if what citizens wanted would really be respected. Chairman Bell blithely replied that what came out of the workshops would be what went in the plan.

The last "workshop," scheduled for the night of January 28, 1981, was to be a wrap-up. It was now

clear that the sketchy work done at the "planning sessions" and the results of the questionnaires constituted the whole of the public input on this plan. There were some who objected, saying that the character of the process made it useful as an opinion poll but totally inadequate as a "planning" process. General opinions about the character of the Field and uses that would or would not be desirable came through loud and clear. However, more complex issues—such as what to do with West Cliff Drive and how to protect the neighborhoods from traffic generated by the Park—were either ignored or very badly handled.

As a result of this criticism, LFC decided that there should be, at the final workshop, an opportunity for individuals to address the group as a whole, to make sure that all options were being considered. Chairman Bell, ever suspicious of unmonitored public participation and aware that some people were very unhappy with the process, placed this item at the end of the agenda and allotted it only 15 minutes. As an extra precaution he took the trouble to announce (before turning the meeting over to the consultant) that he would not allow any group of dissidents to disrupt his meeting.

Unfortunately for the chairman's well laid plans, there were

several groups of dissidents present—eventually it seemed the whole meeting was composed of dissidents of one kind or another. One identifiable group was composed of those who were dissatisfied with the process and wanted more discussion; another was primarily concerned that no provisions had been made to protect its neighborhood from increased and rerouted traffic. In the ensuing chaos it somehow happened that these two groups were forced into conflict with each other when it was necessary. The consultant (hired specifically for his ability to handle or avoid these conflicts) began to lose control.

One look at the confused and angry meeting would have convinced any reasonable person that here was a situation where more discussion was necessary. But, in the opinion of Chairman Bell, there had already been too much of that and, taking matters into his own hands, he preemptively closed the meeting while someone on the floor was in the middle of a presentation. It is, perhaps, a fitting irony (or only another example of Mr. Bell's clumsy bad luck) that the speaker he interrupted was Kathy Beiers, one of the three original founders of the Save Lighthouse Field Association.

If Robert Bell emerges as the villain of this piece, it is because he deserves it. Yet he shouldn't get all the credit. He is, after all, only the Chair of a committee whose members include such high-powered personages as County Supervisor Gary Patton and City Councilmember Mardi Wormhoudt. Wormhoudt can be excused as a newcomer to the committee, but Patton, who has seldom found time in the past to even attend committee meetings, is harder to pardon... he seems to have been afflicted with that form of lock-jaw that attacks incumbents on the eve of an election. Considering that Patton, a normally superlative public servant, owes his political career to Lighthouse Field, his current silence and disinterest is a sad affliction indeed.

Now they have scheduled yet another public meeting at which individuals may make all the suggestions they want that can be said in five minutes. Chairman Bell, ever ready with some gaffe, objected on the grounds that the trouble at the last meeting had started with suggestions from the public, the kind of thing that leads to everyone coming up with "their own little dog and pony act." But this time the rest of the Committee held firm and the meeting is still in the works: June 3, 7 pm, in the Santa Cruz High School cafeteria.

It is difficult to understand attitudes like Bell's in the light of the fact that Lighthouse Field was, from the beginning, a citizens' effort... the work of a handful of "kooks" like John Scott who took the Field away from another joint City-County Committee and tried to give it to the people of Santa Cruz. Why the need for a five-minute limit? Those of us who have cared about the Field these past ten years aren't afraid of a few more months of work to design a park that truly represents the wishes of the community. What could it mean? Another meeting? Why not thank the consultant, pay him his fee, and go on with the planning the way it should have been in the first place, as a community project?

No matter what happens it seems obvious that the current LFC, even if it somehow manages to come up with a plan, will never be able to muster the kind of enthusiastic support that will be needed to implement it. Why not thank them, too, and empower another committee with the task of creating a work force of citizens to design and implement a plan for something we can all be proud of on Lighthouse Field.

Be sure to attend the June 3 meeting. The Committee is seriously entertaining suggestions to build restaurants, skate rentals, bike rentals and god knows what else on the Field. If you've been waiting to see what would happen... it's happening now. □

Next week — what should happen to Lighthouse Field.