

A Park for the People
Origins of the East Bay Regional Park District

On October 18, 1936, the first of the East Bay Regional Parks opened to the people of the East Bay Cities in Northern California. Eight years of well-organized East Bay community effort had come to fruition. The creation of the East Bay Regional Parks District was a significant achievement of regional planning and a remarkable success story of community action.

As the frontier closed in the last decade of the nineteenth century and the modern industrial city crystallized in the first decades of the twentieth century, perceptive Americans in the East characterized a new human need engendered by the stress and constraints of modern city life: the park. The West was fertile ground for their ideas. A rare combination of the right moment and the right people in the East Bay Cities enabled the local community to seize a unique opportunity to translate vision into action. The resulting public parklands have become an important feature of the landscape and quality of life of the San Francisco Bay Area.

Today, one need only take a leisurely Sunday drive, from the West Contra Costa County bay shore eastward and upward through Berkeley into the “hills out back” to understand what had been at stake for the East Bay community. Now the magnificent San Pablo Bay headlands below Point Pinole are blanketed by refineries, rail yards, and the detritus of seventy years of industrial development. The homes and private preserves of the wealthy ascend with every road to the very boundary of the regional parklands above Berkeley. There, all the trappings of twentieth century urban sprawl are halted to give way to majestic vistas of ridgeline and hilltop, hillsides adorned by natural

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woodlands and laced by well-kept trails, with only quiet two lane access roads and unobtrusively placed community buildings the modest concessions to one of the greatest metropolitan centers in America.

Lewis Mumford set forth the challenge of regional planning as an extension of the notion of the garden.

The task of regional planning, as concerns both the earth and cities, is to make the region ready to sustain the richest types of human culture and the fullest span of human life, offering a home to every type of character and disposition and human mood: creating and preserving objective fields of response to man's deeper subjective needs. It is precisely those of us who recognize the value of mechanization and standardization and universalization who must be most alert to the need for providing an equal place for the complementary set of activities—the wild, the various, the spontaneous, the natural as opposed to the human, the lonely as opposed to the collective. A habitat planned so as to form a continuous background to a delicately graded scale of human feelings and values is the prime requisite of a cultivated life.¹

The builder of cities must also be the caretaker of their gardens.

A full generation earlier, a leading American visionary was among the first to articulate this notion. His sons did much to make it a reality. Having completed his monumental achievement as the guiding force of the United States Sanitary Commission, at the end of the American Civil War Fredrick Law Olmsted (1822-1903), the co-designer in 1858 of New York's Central Park, turned his formidable energies to landscape architecture. Influenced by his father's appreciation of the American natural landscape and his own readings as a young man of eighteenth century English landscape

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garden design and aesthetics, Olmsted pictured organic squares and grassy playgrounds to interrupt the monotony and confinement of the rapidly forming industrially organized city grid, and to open the skyscraper-walled streets to more natural views and freshening air. His son, Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. (1870-1957), and stepson and nephew, John Charles Olmsted (1852-1920), inherited the devotion and commitment of their father. The two men founded the Olmsted Brothers landscape architecture firm in 1898.²

The Olmsted Brothers discussed the purposes and requirements of urban and suburban parks in their 1904 analysis for the city of Baltimore. Stressing the qualitative over the quantitative, the park primarily fulfilled the human desire for nature and space. The urban dweller and his children needed playgrounds and athletic fields, the “neighborly recreation” of picnics and other refreshing open air social pleasures of reserved wood and meadow; they benefited from the pleasing effects of intentional design by “shaping utilities into incidental beauty.” They also required “the elemental enjoyment of ... everything we see outdoors.” That meant big parks for natural scenery and spaciousness. The Olmsteds defined the former as a landscape scene in which man’s touch was “not obtrusive.” They took the latter, a “sense of spaciousness,” to be “the expansive opposite of cramping city streets and walls;” for this one needed size, to give “an extended range of vision.”³

The Olmsted Brothers’ assessment of the parkland around Paris, London, New York, and Boston generated a working concept of an optimized urban landscape. They

¹ Lewis Mumford, *The Culture of Cities* (New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1938. Reprint, New York: Harcourt, Brace Jovanovich, 1970), 336.

² Lewis Mumford, *The City in History* (New York: Harcourt, Brace and World, 1961), 423, and National Association for Olmsted Parks: About Olmsted and the Olmsted Legacy, www.olmsted.org, 4/6/2006.

³ Olmsted Brothers. *Report upon the Development of Public Grounds for Greater Baltimore* (Baltimore: The Lord Baltimore Press, 1904), 19-37.

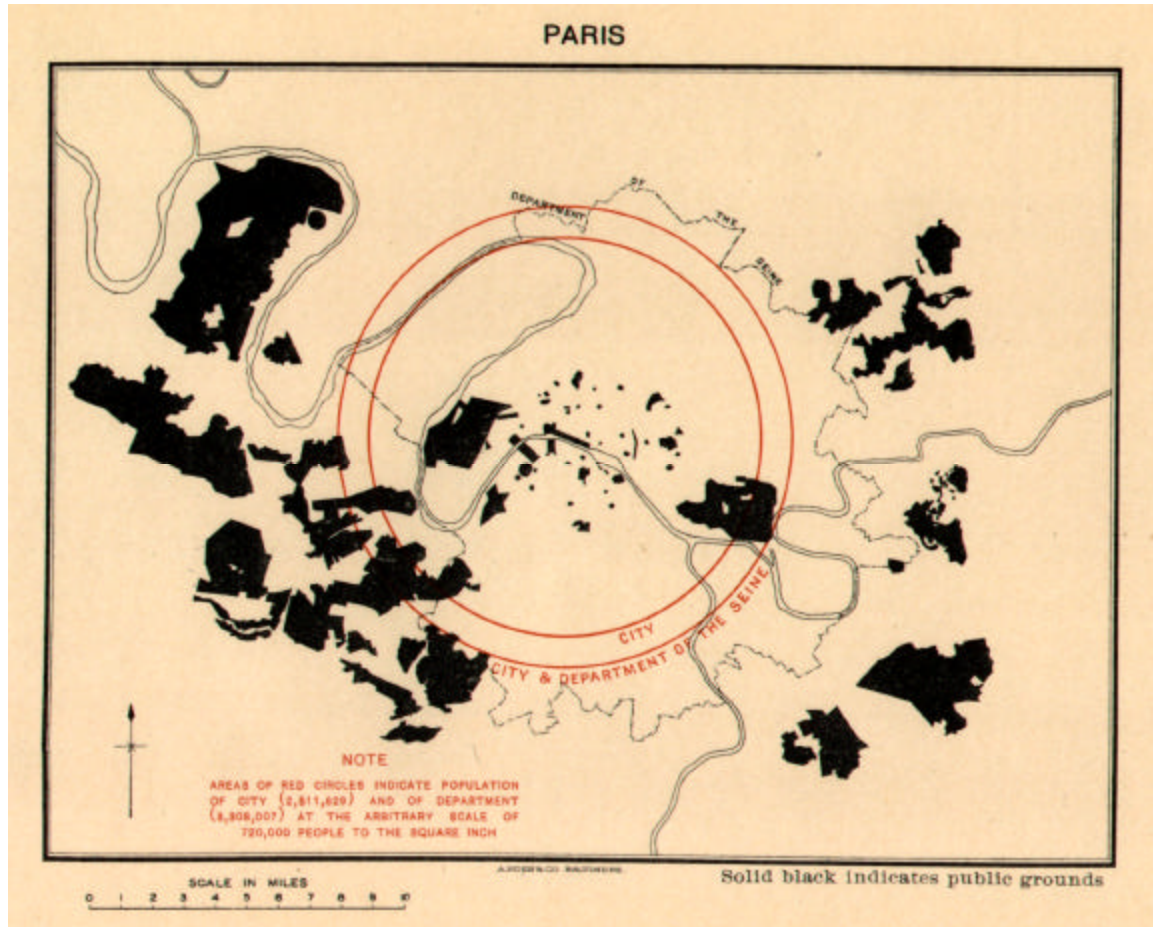
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found that parklands in and around these major cities fell into three classes: some quantity of smaller, distributed parcels not larger than a fraction of a square mile; “long narrow strips forming connecting parkways or boulevards;” and a few, rarely more, big, sometimes very extensive, parks. They found in Paris the nearest, but not perfect, match to their ideal. The French city had too few distributed parcels in the outskirts, and the remains of the huge royal hunting preserves somewhat farther from the city center were larger than necessary. “The large parks of Paris, lying in or beyond the suburbs, are vast tracts even in proportion to the population of the city.” The Olmsteds remarked upon the fortuitous existence of such extensive parks. “...If they had not been long ago set apart by the royal government for totally other reasons, it is questionable whether they would have since been acquired for the use to which they are now devoted—the recreation of the Parisians.” The Olmsteds noted that on Sundays and holidays the people of Paris visited these parks in “surprisingly large crowds.”⁴

⁴ *Ibid.*, 13-14.

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Paris in 1904. Squares and boulevards freshened the air and spirit of the city center, and vast parks provided resort and recreation within easy range of urban dwellers. Olmsted Brothers, Report upon the Development of Public Grounds for Greater Baltimore.

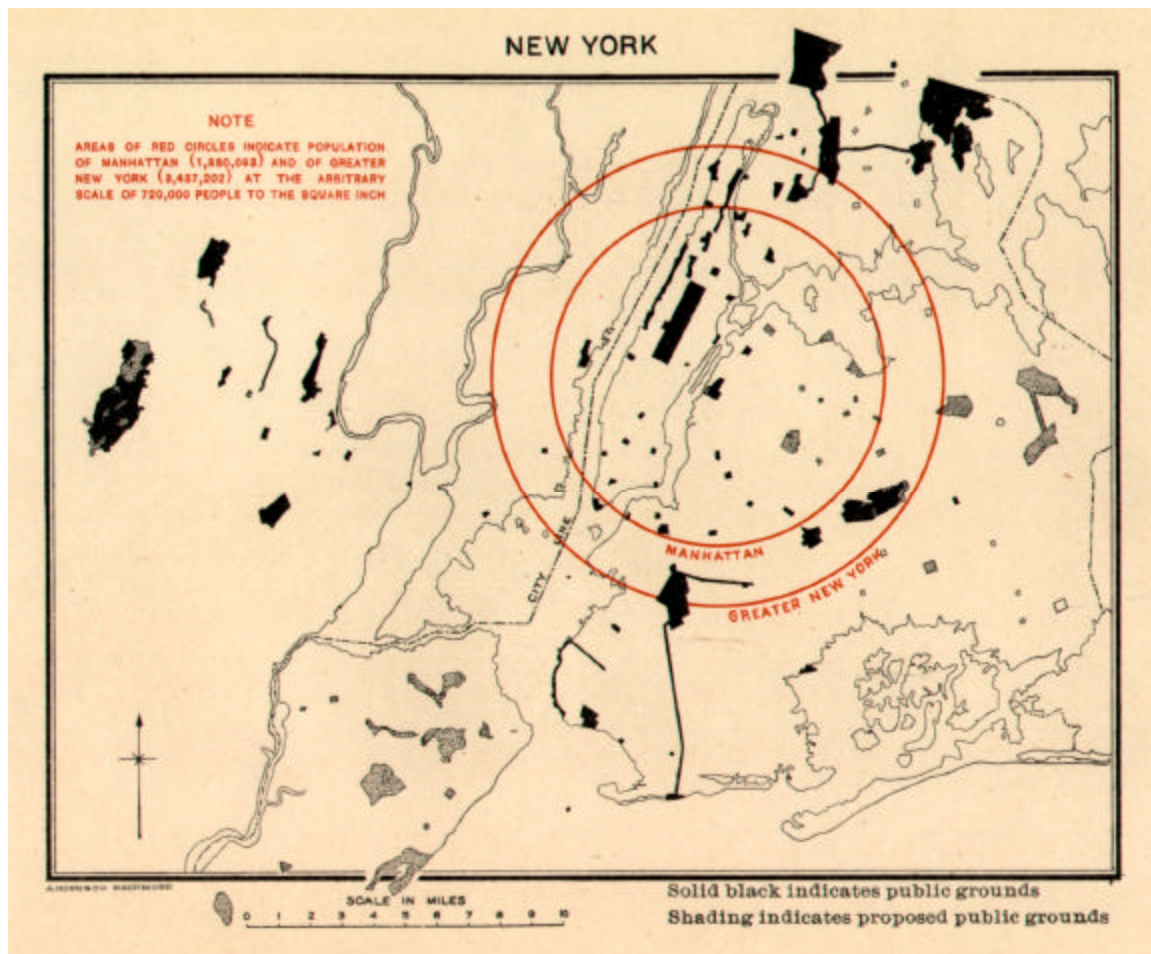
Other cities offered powerful counter examples. The Olmsteds observed that New York, for example, “suffers in attractiveness and healthfulness as compared with Paris through insufficiency of small parks and squares in the denser portions” of the city. Except for Central Park, “the larger parks ... still lie beyond the limit of dense population.” These areas were too distant to meet the growing need of the foreseeable future.⁵

This factor of ever-increasing future need led the Olmsteds to consider the rate of parkland acquisition in view of the requirement for public finance, taking into account the

⁵ *Ibid.*, 15-16.

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relationship of land values to population. In the case of Baltimore, the Olmsteds reckoned that the future cost of land justified the acquisition of the desired tracts “at present market prices with the least possible delay.”⁶



New York in 1904. One great park deep within the city, surrounded by an urban region barren of public parks within a day's reach.

Olmsted Brothers, Report upon the Development of Public Grounds for Greater Baltimore.

In their comprehension of the transition of American society from frontier to urban life ways, the Olmsted Brothers established the aesthetic and pragmatic role of the park in the city. They recognized that parks added distance to urban dimensions, thus increasing the time and energy required for cross town travel. “With modern

⁶ *Ibid.*, 18.

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improvements in transportation ... this drawback does not begin to be of sufficient importance to offset the commercial value of an attractive city.”⁷ Their answer by way of example, in the first decade of the twentieth century, was the Parisian parkway, the *Avenue des Champs Elysees*.⁸

The emergence of the automobile only increased the importance of *the scenic* in the dimensions of parks and the use of space. Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr. recognized and articulated the new set of requirements posed by the automobile in his 1929 survey of potential sites for state parks in California. “Riding for no other purpose than the enjoyment of the pleasant out-of-doors ... is one of the ‘major sports’ of California.”⁹

The need for scenic automobile roads through the East Bay hills had become acute in the 1920’s. “For years San Leandroites have endeavored to secure a new road,” wrote a local newspaper editor, “through the East Bay Water Company’s property, past Lake Chabot and Redwood Canyon.”¹⁰ In the first three decades of the twentieth century, access to and through the beautiful ridges and wooded foothills that formed the eastern horizon for the East Bay Cities, from Richmond to San Leandro, was blocked by the nearly contiguous land holdings of the local water companies.

The question of the water supply for the metropolitan region was of the highest priority. Wallace Stegner postulated that “the West is defined ... by ... a general deficiency of water.”¹¹ This was certainly true in the San Francisco Bay Area in the period of recovery and expansion that followed the Great Earthquake of 1906. The need

⁷ *Ibid.*, 14.

⁸ *Ibid.*, 39. Plate is a photo. The conveyances appear to be horsedrawn carriages.

⁹ Frederick Law Olmsted, Jr., *Report of State Park Survey of California, Prepared for the California State Park Commission* (Sacramento: California State Printing Office, 1929), 15.

¹⁰ *San Leandro Reporter*, August 6, 1926.

¹¹ Wallace Stegner, *The American West as Living Space* (Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1987), 6.

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to support a growing city was not always balanced by the desire to preserve the natural realm at the frontier of its *contado*.¹² The damming of the Hetch Hetchy Valley in Yosemite National Park to create a reservoir for the city of San Francisco was approved by the U.S. Congress in 1913. The conservationist movement that had emerged with the formation of the first national parks under the guidance of Theodore Roosevelt divided into violently opposed utilitarian and preservationist factions. The park interest quickly found its popular voice and balance was soon restored to the conservationist agenda. The utilitarian grasp was moderated by the preservationist reach when the National Park Service was created in 1916, its charter intended to protect the wild life and scenic qualities of natural and historic objects for the benefit of present tourists and future generations.¹³

In the East Bay, the twentieth century began with the Contra Costa Water Company¹⁴ and the East Bay Water Company vying for supremacy in the water distribution market. Intensely competitive, for two decades the water companies engaged in a land acquisition race, purportedly to acquire sufficient holdings to construct large catchment¹⁵ basins for future water supplies, but also to edge out the opponent's access to that land. By 1920 the East Bay Water Company had prevailed, consolidating all the holdings of both water companies.¹⁶ However, any economy of scale supposed to be

¹² Gray Brechin, *Imperial San Francisco* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999), 40.

¹³ Barry Mackintosh, "The National Park Service, A Brief History."

www.cr.nps.gov/history/hisnps/NPSHistory/nphisto.htm, 5/8/2006.

¹⁴ Some accounts give this role to the People's Water Company, which was also absorbed during this era by the East Bay Water Company.

¹⁵ The spelling of this word, meaning a place for water storage, apparently changed during this era, from "cachement" to "catchment." In the nineteenth century frontier West, the word "cache" was frequently used to refer to a relatively small, or ad hoc, storage depot.

¹⁶ Ansel F. Hall, "Preliminary Report on the Proposed East Bay Recreation Forest." Manuscript, circa 1930. Samuel Chester May Papers, Special Collections, Bancroft Library, University of California,

thus obtained, or distribution efficiency anticipated by the water company, was lost on its customers. A prolonged drought severely depleted existing water resources between 1918 and 1924; cachement projects were slow to meet demand: the Upper San Leandro Dam was not completed until 1927. Popular demand for public ownership of the East Bay water system grew, headed by “Earthquake governor” George Pardee (1857-1941). Water consumer dissatisfaction was profoundly aggravated by the Berkeley conflagration of September 17, 1923, when the East Bay Water Company was faulted for inadequate water delivery. The fire began in Wildcat Canyon above Berkeley and descended with disastrous effects into the town. The East Bay Municipal Utility District (EBMUD) had been approved by the voters that May. Declining to join the Hetch Hetchy water project, with Pardee now its Director, the East Bay Municipal Utility District initiated a project to dam the Mokelumne River.¹⁷

By the close of 1928, the East Bay Municipal Utility District had acquired the East Bay Water Company and all its assets and land holdings. There is evidence in the public record that the East Bay Water Company did not go quietly. An extensive summary of the East Bay Municipal Utility District’s Mokelumne Project was released to the press in January, 1928, by Arthur P. Davis, Chief Engineer and General Manager. That the East Bay Municipal Utility District was ready and willing to get the job done was made crystal clear. Principal contracts had been let and construction begun on “the largest piece of engineering of the entire system,” the Lancha Plana Dam, thirty-five

Berkeley, 3-4. We shall have more to say about Hall, who was there for much of what followed in 1929 and 1930.

¹⁷ S. Figuers, *Groundwater Study and Water Supply History of the East Bay Plain, Alameda and Contra Costa Counties, CA*. Norfleet Consultants, Livermore, California, Norfleet Consultants Project Number 971102. Oakland: The Friends of the San Francisco Estuary, June 15, 1998, 44-45. Available at California Environmental Protection Agency, San Francisco Bay Regional Water Control Board, www.swrcb.ca.gov/rwqcb2/.

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miles northeast of Stockton. The press release quoted Davis at length. “‘We believe good time has been made,’ Davis said, ‘...the people desired action on the water problem and the effort has been to get results as quickly and economically as possible.’” The tone of the newspaper report was unabashedly affirmative. “‘We know that the Mokelumne water project can be completed within the original cost estimates and ... the original schedule.... In about two years we will be able to deliver our municipally owned supply of pure mountain water from the Lancha Plana Reservoir.’”¹⁸ Now known as the Pardee Dam, this imposing edifice lies just north of California Route 12 between Valley Springs and Clements. But the East Bay Water Company did not play ball. In July, 1928, the double-sized, double-column headline in one East Bay City newspaper read

UTILITY DISTRICT TO PUT IN OWN DISTRIBUTING SYSTEM;
EAST BAY PRICE TOO HIGH

The report stated that the Directors of the East Bay Utility District had offered to buy the East Bay Water Company’s distribution system, buildings, wells, and tunnels, its water rights, reservoirs surrounded by about 10,000 acres of land, “certain odds and ends and about 20,000 additional acres of watershed lands,” for \$32,488,120. The Water Company did not accept the offer by the June 29 deadline. An accompanying letter signed by feisty Director George Pardee put the onus squarely on the East Bay Water Company to accede to the utilitarian will of the people. “True, we shall have to tear up our streets to put in our own distribution system. True, we shall have a fight with the Water Company.” The people, who had voted the East Bay Municipal Utility District

¹⁸ *San Leandro Reporter*, January 13, 1928.

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into existence, were going to get stuck twice. “By continuing to patronize the East Bay Water Company the people will be compelled to pay interest and principal on outstanding bonds, thus nearly doubling their water bills.” Pardee would use this argument again in 1931, as we shall see. The report declared, echoing Pardee, “We must have a distributing system ready for the Mokelumne water when it gets here in less than two years.” The cost estimate for the new distribution system was put by Pardee at \$26,000,000. The report, siding with Pardee, concluded, “it is believed that the people will prefer to get better water and more of it even if rates are not reduced.”¹⁹ Pardee had called the East Bay Water Company’s bluff. By late September, the East Bay Water Company folded. This time the double-column headline in the same East Bay City newspaper announced

\$35,000,000 PRICE AGREED UPON FOR EAST BAY WATER CO.’S ENTIRE
POSSESSIONS

The article gives a brief and tortured account of the deal, not entirely consistent with the earlier report of Water Company intransigence. The report explained that

the company was holding out for a price of \$32,000,000, which the Utility district engineers believed was several millions in excess of the real valuation and that an independent distributing system could be put in for a much less figure...the negotiations at that time were for the purchase of the water company’s operating system only.²⁰

¹⁹ *San Leandro Reporter*, July 6, 1928.

²⁰ *San Leandro Reporter*, September 28, 1928. This and the following extended quote.

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Now the price provided, “as Dr. Pardee expresses it, for the ‘buying out of the water company lock, stock and barrel.’” The article noted that “the sale includes some 45,000 acres of land.” Pardee’s voice was not in the next paragraph as it set the stage for the next act.

Just what is proposed to be done with these enormous holdings is not stated. As they would belong to the people instead of to a private corporation much of the enclosed territory from which the public is now excluded would provide excellent parks and recreation grounds.

Another East Bay newspaper was no less confusing in its recitation of offer and counter offer. The final deal, “something less than \$35,000,000,” or about three million dollars more than the original Utility District offer, included the East Bay Water Company’s office building and 23,000 acres exempted in the earlier offers. These 23,000 acres, plus the 20,000 watershed acres mentioned in July, account for the 45,000 acres now reported to be in the deal. The inimitable district president, George Pardee, was quoted, “I am glad that we got this cleared up, and now we can get into the water business.”²¹

It was clear to water planners and keen observers that the immense land holdings of the East Bay Water Company were not necessary to the present and future development of the Mokelumne River Project of the new East Bay Municipal Utility District.

Robert Sibley (1881-1958), a popular University of California engineering professor, was among the first citizens of the East Bay Cities to notice that the East Bay Municipal Utility District had unburdened itself of the need for some 11,000 acres of East Bay Water Company land through its commitment to the Mokelumne River Project. The

²¹ *Oakland Tribune*, September 26, 1928.

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long-time Director and leading light of the University of California Alumni Association, well-known on campus as the genial host of student and faculty gatherings and an avid amateur mountaineer, Sibley was described in 1923 as a man who was “among those who had the vision and the human touch, compounded with faith in men.”²² Sibley acted immediately.²³

Sibley sought to involve Professor Samuel Chester May (1887-1955), the Director of the University of California Bureau of Public Administration. May was perhaps the earliest of the many influential Berkeley community figures Sibley recruited. Sibley personally invited May on “East Bay Metropolitan Park Association” stationary to attend an October 11, 1929 meeting at the Argyle Room of the Hotel Leamington in Oakland “to give consideration to a system of parks on property now owned by the East Bay Utility District, lying between Alameda and Contra Costa Counties.” Sibley’s invitation was urgent. “The time is now ripe for a pertinent discussion...and for some sort of action. If we allow these properties to be subdivided and sold to private individuals we will have lost forever an opportunity to build a chain of parks as beautiful as any owned by an American city today.” Sibley signed his “very pressing invitation” as “Temporary Chairman, East Bay Metropolitan Park Association.”²⁴

²² Unidentified newspaper clipping, hand dated 1923, Robert Sibley Papers, Special Collections, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

²³ Samuel C. May, Introduction to *Report on Proposed Park Reservations for East Bay Cities*, by Olmsted Brothers and Ansel F. Hall (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Administration, University of California, 1930. Reprint, San Leandro: East Bay Regional Park District, 1984). Very likely referring to Sibley, May wrote, “Certain far-seeing individuals immediately recognized the park possibilities inherent in this situation, and in the autumn of 1928 the East Bay Metropolitan Park Association...[was] formed...”

²⁴ Robert Sibley, Berkeley, to Samuel Chester May, Berkeley, 4 October 1929, typescript on East Bay Metropolitan Park Association letterhead, Samuel Chester May Papers, Special Collections, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

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About the same time²⁵, Sibley solicited the active participation of Ansel F. Hall (1894-1962).²⁶ Hall was an employee of the National Park Service, which maintained an office on the campus of the University of California. It is likely that Sibley suggested the desirability of a survey of the proposed parklands to Hall. Hall conducted the survey and promptly produced a “Preliminary Report on the Proposed East Bay Recreation Forest,” which included many of his own photographs. May later cited Hall’s National Park Service credentials when he wrote in his introduction to the Olmsted-Hall Report of 1930 that the “preliminary survey conducted through the assistance of Mr. Ansel F. Hall of the National Park Service during 1929-1930 showed these surplus water district lands to be admirably suited to recreational purposes, and demonstrated the necessity for further study.”²⁷ There is some evidence that Hall may have been May’s student at the Bureau of Public Administration. Difficult to discern on the original circa 1930 manuscript of Hall’s “Preliminary Report on the Proposed East Bay Recreation Forest” but quite visible on a higher contrast photocopy, there is a handwritten circled “A” in the upper right corner of the first page of text.²⁸ In the spring of 1930 Hall followed up his preliminary report with a detailed memorandum²⁹ to Professor May under National Park Service letterhead that included the address of Hall’s “Educational Headquarters” at the

²⁵ Hall may have referred Sibley to May.

²⁶ Ansel F. Hall, Berkeley, to Samuel May, Berkeley, 13 May 1930, Samuel Chester May Papers, Special Collections, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. In this memorandum for May concerning the proposed park, about which we shall have more to say, Hall informs May that he, Hall, “was requested some month [sic] ago to act as a consultant in compiling the necessary data.”

²⁷ Samuel C. May, Introduction to *Report on Proposed Park Reservations for East Bay Cities (California)*, by Olmsted Brothers and Ansel F. Hall (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Administration, University of California, 1930. Reprint, San Leandro: East Bay Regional Park District, 1984).

²⁸ Ansel F. Hall, “Preliminary Report on the Proposed East Bay Recreation Forest.” Manuscript, circa 1930. Samuel Chester May Papers, Special Collections, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley, 3. There are many highly suggestive editorial pencil notes for revisions of fact and style to the manuscript, which appears to be a final draft or submission, because Hall’s photos are attached.

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University of California. Hall likely shared this memorandum with Sibley. Drawing from his preliminary report, Hall characterized “The Problem:”

The establishment of an extensive East Bay Forest Park, in the area east of the hills and extending approximately from Richmond to San Leandro, entails two different fields of activities—(1) the accumulation of data, and (2) the presentation of these data in a campaign which will result in the establishment of the park.

Hall then listed the additional data needed.

1. A detailed survey of park problems in other cities comparable in size to the East Bay communities.
2. A survey of present park facilities.
3. Survey of recreational facilities other than parks.
4. A detailed study of the area proposed for the park.
5. Accumulation of maps and other engineering data...
6. Thorough photographic reconnaissance of the entire area.
7. Appraisal of the lands and ... their cost to the East Bay Municipal Utility District.

Hall may have suggested the Olmsted Brothers, possibly by way of George Gibbs at the Olmsteds’ Palo Verde office, to Professor May.³⁰ Hall proposed a budget of \$4,100.

Late in 1929 Sibley consulted the Drury advertising agency of San Francisco about how to organize and promote civic interest in the conversion of the use of this land

²⁹ Ansel F. Hall, Berkeley, to Samuel May, Berkeley, 13 May 1930, Samuel Chester May Papers, Special Collections, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. Both extended quotations that follow are from this memorandum.

³⁰ I conjecture the National Park Service professional Hall was aware of the Olmsted Brothers’ 1904 Baltimore report, but May, who was educated in the East, at Yale and Columbia, may have also seen it.

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as a public park. Aubrey Drury's memorandum was addressed to Sibley as Chairman of the "Oakland-Berkeley Hills Park Committee" at the Stephens Union Building on the University of California campus. Drury must have taken a rather long time to reply to Sibley, for as we have seen, Sibley was using his East Bay Metropolitan Park Association letterhead at the beginning of October. Drury began by recapping Sibley's goal, identical to the Hall memorandum's second field of activity, "...your aim will be to conduct an educational campaign in the East Bay Cities relative to the importance of preserving intact 8,000 or 9,000 acres owned by the East Bay Municipal Utility District, these lands to be set aside as a public park." In six typewritten pages Drury spelled out the details of how his agency would approach the task, plus his recommendations for how to proceed. He concluded with an estimate of the campaign's first six months' cost, \$4,660, and a proposal for the organizational structure of the park committee. Drury calculated that a staggered ladder of membership subscription from \$5 to \$100 per year would yield a first six months' income to the committee of \$4,500.³¹

Sibley effectively used his many contacts in the Berkeley community to get his campaign well under way in the new year 1930. The January number of the Berkeley Chamber of Commerce membership newsletter, the *Berkeleyan*, announced "Metropolitan Park Plans." Clearly composed with Sibley's words, if not by his hand—"we now face what is probably our last opportunity"—the park idea was pushed as far as it would go, and perhaps farther. "This land is already the property of the people ... and no bond issue or other outlay of funds is necessary ... to devote a portion of it to park purposes." It seems that Sibley had some information from the directors of the East Bay

³¹ Aubrey Drury, San Francisco, to Robert Sibley, Berkeley, 8 November 1929, typescript on Drury Agency letterhead, Samuel Chester May Papers, Special Collections, Bancroft Library, University of

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Municipal Utility District, but, as we shall see, starting with one or two facts, the exuberant announcement ventured far beyond what had been settled in the boardroom of that institution.

The Directors of the Utility District would look with favor, we understand, upon the passage by the legislature of an enabling act permitting the Utility District to engage in the park business as well as the water business; in fact the directors are interested to the extent that they have made a rather complete investigation of their own and there is every reason to believe that they would be willing to accede to a general demand that these areas be conserved for parks.³²

In April, the minutes of the February 24 meeting of the East Bay Metropolitan Park Association were distributed to members in a letter on Berkeley Chamber of Commerce stationary. The executive committee included Robert Sibley and Hollis R. Thompson, Mayor of Berkeley and Managing Director of the Chamber of Commerce. The first order of business was the mission of the “contact committee,” to “arrange at once a meeting with the Directors of the East Bay Municipal Utility District to discuss...the possibilities of securing the acreage...we desire for park lands.”³³

The momentum of Robert Sibley’s campaign and the quasi-official enthusiasm of Ansel Hall drew Professor Samuel May steadily toward the front. Although extremely busy with academic affairs, May stepped forward to lend the prestige and resources of the University of California Bureau of Public Administration to the East Bay Metropolitan Park Association movement. It was May who had access to the funding necessary to

California, Berkeley.

³² *Berkeleyan*, January 30, 1930. Samuel Chester May Papers, Special Collections, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

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proceed with Sibley's dream and Hall's program. In the spring of 1930 the Kahn Foundation of San Francisco deposited \$5,200 with the University of California to finance a survey of the East Bay park proposal. In June, the Olmsted Brothers and Ansel F. Hall were invited to jointly conduct the survey. A fee of \$3,000 was agreed upon; when the first payment was made to the Olmsted firm, the receipt, signed by May, documented "services as consultant in Bureau of Public Administration."³⁴ A month later, May informed the Olmsted Brothers firm that the park survey had become the responsibility of Bureau of Public Administration.³⁵

While the Olmsted Brothers and Hall³⁶ set to work on their survey of proposed parkland, May personally began a vigorous letter-writing campaign to solicit sponsorship for the East Bay Metropolitan Park project. "I am attempting in this letter to explain ... the plan of a group of East Bay citizens," he wrote to Mrs. Ralph Ellis, "to set aside for park purposes approximately 8,000 acres of land stretching between San Leandro and Richmond, and now owned by the East Bay Municipal Utility District."³⁷ When the

³³ To Members of the East Bay Metropolitan Park Association, 8 April 1930, Samuel Chester May Papers, Special Collections, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

³⁴ Samuel C. May, Introduction to *Report on Proposed Park Reservations for East Bay Cities (California)*, by Olmsted Brothers and Ansel F. Hall (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Administration, University of California, 1930. Reprint, San Leandro: East Bay Regional Park District, 1984). Also, Samuel May, Berkeley, to George Gibbs, Palo Verde, multiple dates, Samuel Chester May Papers, Special Collections, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. The arrangement with the Olmsted Brothers firm was remarkably informal. The October 1930 receipt of initial partial payment of \$1,500 from the Regents of the University of California to the Olmsted Brothers can be found in May's papers. May's correspondence and business transactions, including payments, with the Olmsted Brothers were managed between May and George Gibbs in the Olmsted Brothers's Palo Verde office.

³⁵ Samuel May, Berkeley, to George Gibbs, Palo Verde, 29 July 1930, Samuel Chester May Papers, Special Collections, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

³⁶ Ansel F. Hall, Berkeley, to Samuel May, Berkeley, 9 June 1930, Samuel Chester May Papers, Special Collections, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. For at least some of the summer and fall, Hall was actually not in the East Bay, but in the Grand Canyon on a National Park Service assignment. On the other hand, several text passages in the "Olmsted-Hall Report" are clearly derived, if not copied verbatim, from Hall's "Preliminary Report."

³⁷ Samuel May, Berkeley, to Mrs. Ralph Ellis, 12 June 1930, Samuel Chester May Papers, Special Collections, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. May was assisted with the letter campaign by his graduate student, Harland Frederick, who recounts several interesting related anecdotes in

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“Olmsted-Hall Report,” as the park survey was subsequently referred to, was published, this group of East Bay citizens became known as the “Committee of 1000,”³⁸ and all their names were printed on the end paper, Mrs. Ellis’ among them.

The December 1930 release of the “Olmsted-Hall Report,” inelegantly titled “Proposed Park Reservations for East Bay Cities (California),” was the defining moment of the East Bay parkland movement. The earnest endorsement of the Olmsted Brothers Landscape Architecture firm and the apparent support of the National Park Service instantly endowed the drive toward a park for the people with marketable, and bankable, credibility.³⁹ In four concise chapters, well illustrated by grand photography of the region, the Olmsted-Hall Report made the case for the conversion of Utility District property to public parkland. The first chapter, “More Parks Are Needed in the East Bay District,” summarizes the needs of the rapidly growing East Bay Cities and outlines the “unusually favorable” opportunity presented by the Municipal Utility District holdings. Attention is drawn to the industrialization of the bay shore, the exclusivity of private development in the hills, and the rising factor of automobile touring. A reasonable proportion of acreage to be set aside for parks and recreation based on several urban examples is suggested, and the East Bay Cities’ severe deficiency is pointedly exhibited. The chapter recalls that in 1866, “before the Bay cities had spread over the lowlands ... Mr. Frederick Law Olmsted, Sr. ... urged the need for local park areas and for a pleasant

“Foreward to the 1984 Reprint of the ‘Olmsted-Hall Report,’” *Report on Proposed Park Reservations for East Bay Cities (California)*, by Olmsted Brothers and Ansel F. Hall (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Administration, University of California, 1930. Reprint, San Leandro: East Bay Regional Park District, 1984).

³⁸ *San Leandro Reporter*, February 6, 1931.

³⁹ Edward H. MacKay III, “Establishment of the District,” in “Foreward to the 1984 Reprint of the ‘Olmsted-Hall Report,’” *Report on Proposed Park Reservations for East Bay Cities (California)*, by Olmsted Brothers and Ansel F. Hall (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Administration, University of California, 1930. Reprint, San Leandro: East Bay Regional Park District, 1984).

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park roadway extending from the University southward along the hills.”⁴⁰ Chapter Two surveys the great variety and many types of recreational uses for which “much of the land of the utility district is *admirably* adapted.”⁴¹ The report’s plan for specific areas, including some recommendations for purposes, service roads, and boundaries is introduced; very detailed “Plans and Recommendations” for twenty-eight areas are displayed in Chapter Four. The second chapter forcefully concludes:

We believe ... that practically all of the front lands [that part of the District lands lying nearest the cities, including the hilltops and the adjacent canyons] owned by the District and not now required for reservoir purposes should be dedicated to park purposes, and should be held as park reservations ... to be developed for more intensive use by the public along certain highways and in certain areas as fast as the demands of the people may warrant.⁴²

The third chapter addresses “The Financial and Administrative Questions Involved.” The chapter begins with the Olmsted Brothers’ central principle of parkland acquisition, as true in 1930 as it was in 1904, so fortuitously manifest in the East Bay as in the case of Paris. “The lands now publicly owned, if sold, would necessarily bring prices *far below any possible replacement value....* Their possible value to the public for park purposes cannot be accurately estimated because no cash value can be set upon matters of health, pleasure, and recreation.”⁴³ The benefits to adjacent private landowners and enterprises is briefly noted, followed by a lengthy itemized discussion for the “care and control of the

⁴⁰ *Report on Proposed Park Reservations for East Bay Cities (California)*, by Olmsted Brothers and Ansel F. Hall (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Administration, University of California, 1930. Reprint, San Leandro: East Bay Regional Park District, 1984), 3-4.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, 10. The report’s italics.

⁴² *Ibid.*, 23.

⁴³ *Ibid.*, 25. The report’s italics.

public lands” on the assumption that “administration under the present District will obviate the necessity of creating another board or commission.”⁴⁴ Fire protection, “of paramount importance,” is given its own headed paragraph. Crediting the East Bay Municipal Utility District for steps already taken, the report assures that “intensive control” of the parklands ought to provide an “additional measure of safety to nearby cities.”⁴⁵ Estimating annual maintenance expenses of \$128,000, the “Olmsted-Hall Report” proposes “an annual tax of three cents on \$100.00 on the \$440,000,000 assessed valuation of the District.”⁴⁶ Thorough and convincingly persuasive, beautifully produced on slick magazine sheets in thick end paper, the report was mailed to its sponsors the day Robert Sibley delivered the student volunteers to stuff the envelopes.⁴⁷



East Bay Cities on the Olmsted-Hall Report 1930 end paper. The scale is approximately

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 27.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, 29.

⁴⁷ Harland Frederick, in “Foreward to the 1984 Reprint of the ‘Olmsted-Hall Report,’” *Report on Proposed Park Reservations for East Bay Cities (California)*, by Olmsted Brothers and Ansel F. Hall (Berkeley: Bureau of Public Administration, University of California, 1930. Reprint, San Leandro: East Bay Regional Park District, 1984).

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that of the 1904 urban park diagrams. This vision would bestow upon the East Bay Cities the greatest urban park system in the world.

Response to the Olmsted-Hall Report was swift and overwhelmingly positive. After the initial mailing to sponsors, several thousand more copies were sent in January 1931 to influential and interested citizens. On January 2, Professor Samuel May was invited to “present your report on the Metropolitan Park Area project” at the Berkeley City Manager’s office at 9 AM, Tuesday, January 6, 1931.⁴⁸ On the same date, Berkeley Mayor Hollis Thompson invited May to a meeting at the Hotel Leamington at 8 PM, Tuesday, January 6, 1931, and added that “definite progress has been made looking toward the acquisition of the large acreage we have in mind.”⁴⁹

The Director of the East Bay Municipal Utility District had yet to be heard from. George Pardee lost no time in delivering his views on the park proposal and its financial foundation. His memorandum,⁵⁰ dated January 10, 1931, injected stern utilitarian rationality into the preservationist exuberance point by point. Pardee begins by accurately summarizing the proposal with a generous estimate of the acreage under consideration, then, before he puts his foot down, clandestinely goes fishing for the East Bay Water Company vigorish he had been forced to ante the previous fall.

The East Bay Municipal Utility District has about 10,000 or 11,000 acres of land, said to be suitable for park purposes, some 22 miles in length, extending from the Chabot Reservoir at San

⁴⁸ Charles W. Davis, Superintendent of Recreation, Berkeley, to Samuel May, Berkeley, 2 January 1931, Samuel Chester May Papers, Special Collections, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

⁴⁹ Hollis Thompson, Berkeley, to Samuel May, Berkeley, 2 January 1931, Samuel Chester May Papers, Special Collections, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. A ledger sheet for the East Bay Metropolitan Park Association in May’s papers dated January 9, 1931 gives the organization’s “approximate balance” as \$11.00.

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Leandro to Richmond.... These lands were acquired by the District at an appraised value of about \$3,000,000.

There is a movement on foot [sic] to have these lands set aside, by the District, for park purposes. Such a donation ... is not consistent with the finances of the District.

Pardee mentions “\$3,000,000” seven times in his three-page memorandum. His ostensible concern is the water bond issue.

It is asserted that the lands have already been paid for by the people of the District.... But every water user must pay for the water he uses, and taxpayers must be ready to bear their share of the water-burden. Therefore ... either the water consumer, or the taxpayer, or both, must make up, at some time and in some way, the amount of money these lands cost the District, plus the \$150,000 interest per annum on \$3,000,000 of water bonds until they shall have been paid off.

Pardee suggests that district growth may make it necessary to finance “more Mokelumne pipes” through land sales.⁵¹ His underlying concern is the enormous workload of the utility district board of directors, but he wants his money back. “It is also proposed that the District Board of Directors shall assume – in addition to their onerous duties and responsibilities in administering the water system – the duties of a park board...” casting his fly yet again, the virtuous Pardee offers an eminently pragmatic solution, that “the Legislature provide for a park board; let this Board ask the people of the District to vote, say \$3,000,000 on park bonds.” Protecting his territory, he closes with the board behind

⁵⁰ No addressee, from George C. Pardee, East Bay Municipal Utility District, 10 January 1931, Samuel Chester May Papers, Special Collections, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley. All quoted passages in this paragraph are taken from Pardee’s memorandum.

⁵¹ An economic action utterly contrary to the Olmsted Brothers’ principle that government entities invariably sell low and buy high.

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him, “The District’s Directors strongly advise against any ... donation, of any of the District’s water assets,” and lastly, he sternly admonishes any who would presume to trespass, “Parks are, of course, fine things to have, but it is not sound District financing to rob Water Peter to pay Park Paul, when they can be had without robbing Peter of anything.”

Professor Samuel May occupied himself with the composition of his press release, intended for publication on Friday, January 30, 1931. He composed his mailing list of newspapers: Oakland Tribune, [Oakland] Post Enquirer, San Francisco Examiner, San Francisco Chronicle, Berkeley [Daily] Gazette, Richmond Independent, Richmond Herald, [Oakland] Inter-city Express, San Leandro Reporter, and Alameda Times-Star. May’s release introduced the park movement and its consolidated, renamed organization. “The permanent organization of the East Bay Regional Park Association took place last night in the Hotel Oakland, more than a thousand people having joined this organization as sponsors for the Regional Park project...”⁵² His release announced several Park Association propositions, including

1. That ... approximately 10,000 ... acres of land now publicly owned ... be designated...and administered by the Directors of the District for park purposes...
2. ...without the creation of any new governmental district or agency...
3. That the present law be amended to permit the East Bay Municipal Utility District to... administer parks with the power to tax...

⁵² Samuel May, “Special letter with news item re meeting of East Bay Regional Park Assoc’n sent to following newspapers,” 29 January 1931, Samuel Chester May Papers, Special Collections, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

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4. That it is neither necessary nor expedient that a bond issue or other capital outlay be voted by the people of the District to purchase lands ... already owned by them.⁵³

All the cards were on the table. Pardee and the East Bay Municipal Utility District had been called by the parkland proposal community, under the banner of the East Bay Regional Park Association. Once again, as in 1928, George Pardee had the high hand. The utility district would not manage the proposed regional park. But there would be a regional park. Pardee's new chip staked the next game. Although lacking unanimous member support, the East Bay Regional Park Association soon conceded the East Bay Municipal Utility District's administrative deference and began to publicly advocate state legislation to create a regional park district. The mayors of the East Bay Cities showed their support by forming the Regional Park Board, chaired by Oakland's Elbert M. Vail. Lobbying began in Sacramento, even if "there was no precedent for a regional park agency."⁵⁴ In March of 1933 state representative and former Oakland mayor Frank K. Mott prepared AB1114 to authorize the creation of a regional park district and its governing board, subject to the approval of the electorate.⁵⁵ Fearing a loss to its tax base, the still semi-rural Contra Costa County withdrew its cities, Richmond and El Cerrito, from participation in the forthcoming park district referendum. Alameda County was on its own.⁵⁶ There, the parkland movement sought and won the support of the people. The spirit of community vision and action ultimately won the day: a preservationist concession created a utilitarian compromise to push the conservation effort forward.

⁵³ *San Leandro Reporter*, February 6, 1931.

⁵⁴ Mimi Stein, *A Vision Achieved: Fifty Years of East Bay Regional Park District*, (San Leandro: East Bay Regional Park District, 1984), 8-9.

⁵⁵ *Oakland Tribune*, March 30, 1933.

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On March 12, 1931, Robert Sibley had written “My dear Prof. May” that “Everyone present at the Park Committee meeting with the East Bay Utility Board last evening could not help but feel a great sense of enthusiasm and inspiration over its outcome, looking toward the successful completion of our park movement.”⁵⁷ On Saturday, November 3, 1934, a massive “get out the vote” parade of twelve floats representing the recreation to be enjoyed by children and adults if made possible by the Regional Park District marched a great loop down Telegraph Avenue from Berkeley to Oakland, out East Twelfth Street to San Leandro, then up Estudillo and on to High Street in Alameda, and through the tube to Broadway in Oakland and finally back to Berkeley.⁵⁸ Sibley was right. The following Tuesday the regional park ballot passed by more than a 2 to 1 margin.⁵⁹ The people had their victory parade, and now they had their park.



⁵⁶ Mimi Stein, *A Vision Achieved: Fifty Years of East Bay Regional Park District*, (San Leandro: East Bay Regional Park District, 1984), 11.

⁵⁷ Robert Sibley, Berkeley, to Samuel May, Berkeley, 12 March 1931, Samuel Chester May Papers, Special Collections, Bancroft Library, University of California, Berkeley.

⁵⁸ *Oakland Tribune*, November 2, 1934.

⁵⁹ *Oakland Tribune*, November 7, 1934. The vote was 90,956 yes, 36,485 no.

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Ansel F. Hall

(www.cr.nps.gov/history/online_books/sontag/hall.htm)

George C. Pardee

(capitolmuseum.ca.gov/english/legislature/governors/links/personal/gov21.html)

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May 20, 2006

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