A Strong Past, A Bright Future

Long before there was Leslie Knope fighting for public space in NBC’s fictional comedy television show “Parks and Recreation,” there was the East Bay Regional Park District. It is the oldest and largest regional park district in the nation, serving 2.5 million residents in Alameda and Contra Costa Counties. The district maintains 113,000 acres of land, including 65 parks and 1,200 miles of trails. In the 1970s, the district began creating a network of paved trails to connect the 33 East Bay communities—a network that currently offers 175 miles of multi-use trails for nonmotorized transportation. A number of these trails follow existing or former rail corridors, including the award-winning 23-mile Iron Horse Regional Trail. The two counties receive an estimated 3.5 million visits to their trails annually, and 90 percent of East Bay residents visit their park system each year.

Created in 1934, the park district has a long-established legacy of providing much-needed and hard-earned open spaces and recreational opportunities—even in difficult economic times—something that has greatly enhanced the liveability, marketability and character of the East Bay. Despite a decrease in revenue—Alameda and Contra Costa counties both peaked at 11.7 percent unemployment in 2010—the park district continues to serve “as a vital economic engine...providing both regular district jobs as well as creating jobs through construction and other projects,” says General Manager Robert Doyle. “We were created in the heart of the depression in the 30s, so we try to remember that when things are very difficult now with the economy, people had the vision and foresight to say we needed a place for recreation for people in need and for people to enjoy with a long-term vision.” This vision and foresight is well appreciated by residents, with more than 70 percent of voters voting to support the work of the park district with a $225-million bond measure in 1988 and a $500-million bond measure in 2008, in addition to annual property tax revenue.
QUOTES:

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—ROBERT DOYLE, general manager, East Bay Regional Park District

“(The East Bay Green Transportation Initiative) will further link urban corridors—where lower-income workers and students have few transportation options—more directly to transit centers, and therefore, jobs and educational opportunities beyond their immediate community.”

—SENATOR DIANE FEINSTEIN

“We’re linking buses, trains and Bay Area Rapid Transit with schools, consumer centers and residential districts... The aim, of course, is to get people to leave their cars in their garage...and use our trail system as a nonmotorized, green transportation network.”

—JIM TOWNSEND, trail program manager, Green Transportation Initiative

MORE INFORMATION

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The district has positioned itself not just as a provider of open space and recreation opportunities, but as a serious transportation alternative for residents. Already, transportation use of the regional trails is estimated at 750,000 visits annually. In 2010, the park district was awarded a $10.2-million federal Transportation Investment Generating Economic Recovery Grant (TIGER) by the U.S. Department of Transportation to complete its trail network. The East Bay Green Transportation Initiative will complete the trail network begun in the 1970s, providing gap closures and enhancing access to public transportation. Trail Program Manager Jim Townsend is spearheading the Green Transportation Initiative. “We’re linking buses, trains and Bay Area Rapid Transit with schools, consumer centers and residential districts,” he said. “The aim, of course, is to get people to leave their cars in their garage...and use our trail system as a nonmotorized, green transportation network.”

East Bay residents invest an estimated $78.40 per household each year in the district through property taxes and bond measures. In return, the district delivers mobility options and healthy recreation opportunities that are tremendously valuable to the quality of life of the residents of the East Bay. A study published in 2000 found that the district also benefits the area economically through increased property values, direct economic activity, agricultural production, ecosystem services, growth management, public health, public education and public safety. Through prudent management, the East Bay has accommodated tremendous population growth, economic fluctuations and environmental challenges in a sustainable way, positioning the region to enter a new century where the opportunities for the next generation to “Embrace Life!” are ensured.