



By John Hart

OKAY, IT'S conceivable that San Rafael paid Frank Sinatra too much for his 539 acres of parkland in the San Pedro Hills north of town. Maybe Sinatra, unwilling to lose a big tax writeoff, would have signed the property over for nothing if the city had been stubborn enough. Quite a few people seem to think so.

But what matters now isn't the arithmetic of who came out financially ahead. What matters is that those 539 acres are up there, and that they are San Rafael's. Whatever they think of Sinatra's gesture, the people of San Rafael have gained almost a square mile of spectacular dedicated parkland along the San Pedro Range, the hills that make the big San Pedro Peninsula.

Now that we are looking in the direction of the San Pedros, maybe this is a good time to think about a related idea, an old persistent idea that has attracted planners for years, but which has never seemed quite practical to realize: the dream of a spacious, centrally located San Pedro Mountain and Shoreline Park, a really extensive, beautiful and widely varied recreation preserve covering the wooded San Pedro Range from San Rafael to the Frank Lloyd Wright Civic Center, and from Highway 101 to the windless sheltered beaches of San Pablo Bay.

It isn't that a park like this — 1200 or 1500 acres perhaps, not counting the Sinatra grant — would be cheap or come easy. It isn't even that Marin County couldn't possibly survive without it.

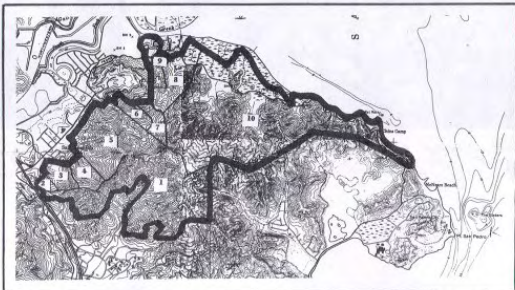
But as a nation we know how often we've let rare and irreplaceable things slip away from us, things which should never have been lost and which we never meant to lose. As a county we can already remember too many losses, looking back with regret and anger at our own blindness.

Perhaps this mountain peninsula, still open, still quiet and verdant, deserves one more long and careful look before we dismiss forever the idea of saving a major recreational park on these hills and along this coastline.

Our peninsulas

Marin has three rugged peninsulas pointing out into San Francisco and San Pablo Bays: Tiburon, San Quentin, and on the north San Pedro. Of the three, the San Pedro has the highest hills, the thickest forest, and the most remaining wild shoreline. Indeed these hills — already almost surrounded by Greater San Rafael — are as close to wilderness as anything in East Marin; and the peninsula's northern shore, where the hills come down to cliffs, to small clean beaches, and to the changing, brilliant, almost unearthly marshes of San Pablo Bay, is perhaps the finest piece of bayside shoreline we have left — not only in Marin, but anywhere else in the San Francisco metropolitan area.

Even in the 1950's, when less of the bay shore had been destroyed, the San Pedro Peninsula was recognized as something special. In 1957, a state report declared: "It is important that this area be included in the State



Park System to meet existing and future public needs." The report suggested a park of 2700 acres, with 6 miles of shoreline on San Rafael and San Pablo Bays.

Even though the State was never able to buy that park, the reasons for buying it are still good, and still there. Subdivisions have taken the flatter valleys on the south side of the peninsula, the San Rafael side, but the north is, amazingly, almost unchanged. The spectacular views, the beaches, the marshes, the woods, the creeks, the waterfalls are all still there.

These values are reason enough, you'd think, for considering a regional park on the peninsula most

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carefully. But today there are two more reasons, maybe more important still.

Three miles inland from San Pablo Bay, the easternmost ridge of the San Pedro Range ends only a few hundred feet away from the Marin County Civic Center, and gives the Wright buildings the forested backdrop you see in all the photos. Here is a chance to make the Civic Center grounds part of a priceless regional park, and starting point for a county scenic road along the bay and for the best trail system in East Marin.

Frank Lloyd Wright actually designed the Civic Center buildings to repeat and reinforce the simple lines of the surrounding hills. Unless the San Pedro Mountains, the closest and most dramatic of these echoing ranges, are

A Park

THE proposed greenbelt stands out darkly along the hills running out toward San Pedro Point, above, and down to such bayside tranquility as the salt marshes and beaches to the north, opposite page. Map shows current owners and acreage of the plots that could be included in a park: (1) City of San Rafael (Sinatra property), 539 acres; (2) Karl, Letha Kalberer, 13 acres; (3) Helen Sceffrini et al, 54; (4) Daniel Koo, the Shui Hing Co., Hongkong, 53; (5) Jessie Stetson, 25; (6) C. P. Gulchard et al, 40; (7) Harry Johnson, 42; (8) Henry, Louise Boyd, 97; (9) Remillard Brick Co., L. Dandini, Hillsborough, 33; (10) N. Y. Calif. Industrial Corp., San Francisco, 887.

special protected, this open background cannot last, and much of the special beauty of the Wright design will be lost with it.

Perhaps this is one reason for the great greenbelt that the Association of Bay Area Governments is now proposing for the San Pedros in its new regional plan. But there is almost certainly a larger reason.

For years and years in Marin we have assumed that the suburbanization of West Marin was inevitable. Nobody had thought of doing more than delay it, though people looked for controls that would save the new towns from the dreariness that we see more and more in East Marin.

Early this year, ABAG's Bay Area Regional Plan broke that pattern of thought, perhaps forever. For ABAG claims that a suburban West Marin is not necessary, not inevitable, not even desirable, but proposes instead a Marin County sharply divided into an urban east and a rural and recreational west.

Many conservationists, who had taken the destruction of West Marin for granted, were much encouraged; and many are working now to see that the ABAG plan is actually carried out by local governments here.

The other side

But along with the new hope, there has come to some a hard uncomfortable fear: Does this mean that the planners are abandoning East Marin entirely? Are we all going to have to live in a little Los Angeles-on-the-Bay, a sort of rich environmental ghetto? What good will it do us to have a pretty place to go on weekends, if we have to see an ugly one every weekday? Obviously, this isn't what ABAG planners want to

for East Marin



happen, and Marin's City-County Planning Council is even now looking for ways to avoid it.

To help prevent this deterioration in the east, the ABAG plan proposes narrow greenbelts of open space to separate Mill Valley from Corte Madera, Corte Madera from San Rafael, San Rafael from the Gallinas Valley, and that valley from Novato.

But in the San Pedro Range north of San Rafael, ABAG proposes more than just that greenbelt. Its plan suggests a major San Pedro open space preserve, a wide park on the whole north face of the range, from the thousand foot crest to the valley floor and the bay.

As a matter of fact, this San Pedro preserve, along with some valley open space recommended just north of the Civic Center, would be the one really big undeveloped area in East Marin...if we find ourselves able to follow ABAG's advice and set the land aside.

This green island would be significant indeed. It could be almost the town park of urban Marin, a larger and wilder town center. It could join the government center of the county with a wilderness preserve, scenic drives, trail systems, camping and tourist centers, and the most beautiful bay shoreline anywhere in the metropolitan area. It could fulfill the intentions of Frank Lloyd Wright's design. It could help keep urban Marin a place marvelously worth living in.

Costs and prospects

Is such a park worth the expense — which would be great? If we think it is, can we achieve it before the developers (and they are interested) make our decision for us?

According to the old ways of thinking, we don't have a chance. The county has so far proposed only small parks on the peninsula. That's natural. Big land purchases have usually been by the state or by the federal government, not by local authorities. Ten years ago it would have seemed ridiculous even to discuss a County park of 1500 acres, no matter how important. But our ideas are changing. Planners in urban areas talk of preserving not just thousands but even hundreds of thousands of acres in open space. And they argue that preservation can cost less in the long run than sprawling development.

Then, too, governments are finding that they can often preserve open land without buying it outright.

The job of saving the San Pedro Peninsula, the unspoiled part of it, may not be as formidable as it looks. The range isn't half as big as it seems when you look up at it from the valley floor or spend an afternoon walking in its woods.

It is more or less the shape of a diamond. From the central peak (1058 feet), four main ridges slope down to the points of a diamond, east to the Bay, west to Highway 101, south and north. Smaller ridges between them fill in the sides of the diamond. Unless you are miles away, you usually see just one side of the range at a time.

The southwest side, where Sinatras had his land, faces downtown San Rafael. The canyon floors here are already settled, and almost all of the open upland that remains is in the Sinatras grant, a splendid beginning for the ABAG greenbelt.

The southeast side is toward San Rafael Bay, and here, too, development has gone far. Of the four quarters of the range, this is probably the least important to preserve.

A backdrop

The northwest side — next to the Sinatras property — drops to the Civic Center; one hillside farm ends just across the intersection from the Civic Center gate. The big parcels on this slope only add up to about 460 acres, with an estimated market value of perhaps \$560,000. If the county could buy them, or otherwise secure them, it would save this natural background of the Civic Center design.

The northeast side, where unbuild hills fall to unfilled marshland, is the most beautiful and most important of all. This slope is also the largest, with almost a thousand acres, mostly in a single ownership and having an estimated market value of about \$1.4 million. It might not be necessary to own the whole thousand acres in order to protect the shoreline and a corridor of parkland connecting this part of the preserve with the Civic Center and with the Sinatras parcel.

Some will feel that this greenbelt, somewhere between 1000 and 1500 acres, is impractical for us even today. But tomorrow will be too late. And in the planning of the coming decade, an idea like this one won't seem in the least unreasonable, or radical, or improbable. And so we should consider very carefully whether it is wise to throw this chance away by our inaction now.

There seem to be two obstacles. One is the New York-

California Industrial Corporation, which owns about half of the San Pedro Range, including the critical 1000 acres along San Pablo Bay. New York-Cal once proposed to fill the bay marshes and build on them, and it still has ambitious plans for development.

What about money?

The second obstacle, naturally, is money. There are various ways to get around it, including:

a. Help from a regional agency. The budget of the County Parks and Recreation Department is neither large enough nor predictable enough to help much with a project as large as this. But a Marin County Regional Park District, including the incorporated cities, would have a better chance. Such a district would be supported, not by an annual dole from the supervisors, but by a small tax of its own. Like the East Bay Regional Park District, it could plan ahead and pay for large parcels in yearly instalments.

Still better might be a Bay Area Regional Park District. Parkland in Marin serves the whole Bay Area, and a BARPD might help Marin with money from the more industrial countries.

A Regional Open Space Agency — and we may well get one — would want to buy a lot of the San Pedro land soon. Like a Regional Park District, it could bring in money from other counties, perhaps from the state and federal governments.

Pierre Jooke, head of the Parks and Recreation Department, has suggested a double weekend toll on the Golden Gate Bridge, with the extra money going for parks in the six counties that make up the Golden Gate Bridge District. In 1968, Jooke estimates, the extra toll could have brought between \$300,000 and \$400,000 for parks in Marin alone.

b. A county bond issue. It is hard to say now what chance a Parks and Open Space bond issue would have in Marin in the 1970's, but it will very likely be proposed.

c. "Land Bank" purchases. In a "Land Bank" acquisition, you buy more land than you intend to keep, then sell the extra to developers at a profit. Thus you may actually break even in the long run.

This method is often used by redevelopment agencies, but seldom for recreation. San Rafael may soon try it on the Sinatras property: the city council has reserved the right to sell part of the new park later on. (Unfortunately, the council refused to set any limit on the amount it can resell.)

d. Less-than-fee acquisition. Instead of buying land outright, you can often buy scenic easements, trail easements, or development rights. These rights and easements can open some public access and preserve open space, without too great expense. It is unclear at present whether such rights can be condemned.

e. Donations; help from conservancy groups. Sometimes land owners are willing to donate their property or rights on their property to governments or to groups like the Nature Conservancy, for love of the land and for tax benefits.

There are various ways of controlling land without buying it through zoning. It is not clear at this point just what restrictions you can impose without coming too close to hidden confiscation, and all zoning is useless if it is not stubbornly enforced. Two kinds of zoning are specially interesting for the San Pedros:

1. Risk zoning. You don't have to let a man build a house on a flood plain or on the San Andreas Fault. Some steep slopes in the San Pedros may be likely to slide, in which case you could certainly forbid development on them.

g. Compensable regulation. This is a new method, now being tested in Pennsylvania. It works like this: (1) you zone a parcel to restrict development; (2) you lower its assessed valuation; (3) if the owner sells the land for less than the market value was just before the zoning was imposed, you pay him the difference. However, the new market value is what the new owner actually pays, so the price of land may actually drop, making it easy for the local government to buy it if it wants to.

Right now, planners are working out a whole new technology of open space protection, and a lot of questions are unanswered, especially legal ones. But in Marin we do not have time to wait until the technology is firm and our rights responsibilities are clear. In the 1970's, the decade of crisis, we have to proceed as well as we can. We want to experiment, goof if we must, and learn as we go along.

When we plan to save open space, we see a hundred urgent needs: the greenbelts between towns, the shores of Tomales Bay, the wilderness corridor from the Golden Gate to Point Reyes National Seashore. But maybe the big park in East Marin, the marvelous San Pedro Mountains Regional Park, is not less urgent than the rest.