

San Francisco Chronicle

Peninsula beach to become public park; spot not far from disputed Martins Beach

By Peter Fimrite | Nov. 16, 2017



The rain had stopped when San Mateo County Supervisor Don Horsley stepped out from behind a dilapidated home with peeling pink paint this week and walked through the morning mist to the edge of a coastal bluff.

There, laid before him, were a mile of beach, a babbling creek and towering cliffs overlooking the roiling blue sea — a rugged expanse south of Half Moon Bay known as Tunitas Creek Beach.

The 58-acre panorama of natural beauty, which had been private property for more than a century, was to be bought Thursday for \$5 million by the nonprofit Peninsula Open Space Trust, known as POST. The group — well aware of a nasty tug-of-war over public access a few miles up the coast at Martins Beach — plans to turn the former Ohlone village site into a county park accessible to everyone.

“It’s a great place to see whales,” Horsley said as he looked out over the landscape, the beach’s signature creek running across the sand. “It’s like the jewel in the crown of our park system. I think it is going to be the most breathtaking park in the county.”

It is exactly the kind of deal that county and state regulators would like to see at Martins Beach, where the billionaire owner, Vinod Khosla, claims the public has no right to cross his 90-acre property and access the sandy cove he purchased for \$32.5 million in 2008.

Khosla shut the access gate in September 2010, citing the cost of maintenance and liability insurance, after the previous owners had admitted the public for at least 70 years. That set off a fury of lawsuits and regulatory and legislative action. In August, a San Francisco appeals court affirmed a 2014 ruling by a San Mateo judge who ordered Khosla to let the public into the comely cove — but the battle appears to be far from over.

The newly purchased coastal property, at the intersection of Tunitas Creek Road and Highway 1, covers the entire beach south of the creek.

It has a colorful history as a resting spot for Indians, Spanish explorers, loggers, rum runners, bohemians, poachers, surfers and campers. The land, dotted with old shacks and an abandoned house, was divided in two in 1995, but the owner moved out after only three years when the house caught fire and a landslide knocked out water service.

The beach, home to a federally protected bird, the snowy plover, isn't easy to reach, but became a popular site for overnight camping and other illegal activities after the owner moved away.

Walter Moore, the president of POST, said his organization decided to buy the property after the county received complaints about noisy Burning Man-style beach parties, littering and illegal parking along Tunitas Creek Road.



County supervisors banned bonfires and overnight camping in July, but just about everyone who got interested in the matter was afraid the owner would sell the land to someone like Khosla, the co-founder of Sun Microsystems, who has dragged government and regulatory agencies through the legal mud.

“We didn’t want to go through another Martins Beach,” Horsley said. “We wanted to make sure this was something that could be enjoyed by the general public.”

Moore said it took a year of negotiation to persuade the owner to agree to the \$5 million price.

“This is a wonderful example of what can happen when numerous people work together for the public good,” Moore said.

POST plans to raise another \$10 million to clean up the cliffs and beach, remove buildings, build a trail from the cliffs, and create parking, restrooms and possibly a ranger station. The sprawling 1950s-era pink house — now infested with rats and mice — will either be renovated or torn down.

The idea is to open the beach to the public within three years, though the county is expected to put in at least \$10 million more over the next decade to protect and manage the park and restore the creek. Moore said a new section of the 1,200-mile California Coastal Trail will be developed in the area.

The mouth of Tunitas Creek was, for many centuries, the sight of an Ohlone seasonal village. It’s thought to have been a stopping point for Don Gaspar de Portolá during the 1769 expedition that discovered San Francisco Bay.

During the Gold Rush, the cove became a harbor for boats shipping redwood logs up and down the coast. A large wooden logging shoot once graced the beach’s northern bluff, according to local historians.

Tunitas Creek was once the terminus of the Ocean Shore Railroad, which transported tourists down the Peninsula until 1910. During Prohibition, the beach was used by bootleggers bringing booze to the



John Blanchard / The Chronicle

Peninsula, Horsley said, before it hosted an artist colony from the 1920s through the 1940s — the genesis of shacks that still exist.

The beach is popular with surfers, who are well aware of the sea lions, elephant seals and hungry great white sharks that sometimes pay visits. Shark sightings are so frequent, in fact, that surfers have come up with an alternative name: Don't Eat Us Beach.

Restoration won't be easy. The beach is currently accessible only via a steep, eroded trail next to Tunitas Creek. The county and POST said they will work with conservation groups like the Surfrider Foundation and with the property owners on the north side of the beach, who have long complained about the overnight campouts and rave parties.

"Places like Tunitas Creek Beach belong to everyone," said Kari Mueller, vice chairwoman of Surfrider in San Mateo County, which sued Khosla in 2013, arguing that shoreline access is a public right under the California Coastal "To ensure that everyone can continue enjoying this beautiful place we need to responsibly improve, manage, and maintain the public access," she said. "We all share the responsibility of making and keeping this a special space."

<https://goo.gl/y4qrHw>