

## Tunitas Creek steers toward restoration

*POST, San Mateo County acquire beachfront property*

By Samantha Weigel | Nov 17, 2017

In a rare opportunity to expand San Mateo County's park system, 58 acres of the remote and environmentally sensitive Tunitas Creek Beach have been purchased for the benefit of the public.

Reports of elaborate raves, a reported drowning, illegal campers and immense amounts of trash being left at the vast coastal property prompted county officials and environmental advocates to get involved. After more than a year of negotiations, the Peninsula Open Space Trust announced it purchased the southern end of the property for \$5 million and will seek to raise \$10 million to assist the county in rehabilitating and preserving the property for safe public access.



“When it’s clean, it’s just a spectacular beach. In my opinion, the best stretch of beach on the coast. So I am really elated and excited,” said Don Horsley, president of the Board of Supervisors whose district includes the coastside. “It’s a fragile environment and we want people to enjoy it, but at the same time we want to preserve it.”

There are two parcels that have been privately owned for more than a century, and the county and POST worked with both before negotiating purchase of the southern lot. The move was prompted following complaints about large amounts of trash speckled across the beach and creek following well-attended and illegal parties. The property, which is difficult to access from either a treacherous steep bluff or a winding path along the sensitive creek, was an attraction for illicit raves and overnight campers.

In July, the county Board of Supervisors approved rules prohibiting camping and fires on the beach in an effort to more immediately curb environmental degradation while negotiations over the sale continued.

POST announced it bought part of the site from V Trust, LLC, which owned the land south of the creek that includes a rundown house that was abandoned after it caught fire on the bluffs. Now, POST is looking to raise \$10 million from the community and organizations to fund the purchase and environmental restoration of the cliffs and beach. The money would support the design and construction of safe public access trails, parking, restrooms and possibly a ranger station, according to POST.

“A stunning property like Tunitas Creek Beach should be cared for and available for everyone to enjoy,” POST President Walter T. Moore said in a press release. “This is an ambitious vision that is going to take support from the entire community to make it a reality. We hope to restore this property and open it to everyone to visit and be refreshed by its beauty and to share its many natural resources with all of the living things that make Tunitas Creek and the beach their home.”

The site serves as nesting grounds for the endangered snowy plover and some conservationists believe restoring the creek holds the potential for spawning steelhead trout and salmon to return.

### **Rich history**

The site’s rich history includes it once serving as an Ohlone seasonal village and stopping point on the Spanish Portolá expedition before explorers went on to discover the San Francisco Bay, according to POST. Fast forward centuries later, and Tunitas Creek Beach busted onto the social media scene as secluded stomping grounds for overnight campers and Burning Man-style raves. Some would pump water from the creek for makeshift hot tubs during campouts, and the riparian corridor would be bombarded with human excrement due to a lack of restrooms. Emergency responders would descend onto the site after injuries resulting from people scuffling down the steep bluffs and last year a person reportedly drowned at the beach.

POST and county officials have been evaluating the site and found an area they believe could be stabilized and used as an access path for the public and emergency responders, Horsley said. But it’s expected to take up to three years to complete the amount of work required to restore the site. The work will include reinstating a water connection severed during a landslide, and is required to build restrooms and a ranger station where the dilapidated house now stands, Horsley said.

But POST and the county have emphasized the acquisition is not about keeping people away from the beautiful site, it’s about instating safe public access that will simultaneously help protect the environment.

### **Beach battle**

The acquisition comes as a battle to reopen another beach just to the north continues. Coastal advocates, the county, state agencies and the Legislature have taken various steps to force billionaire property owner Vinod Khosla to restore public access to Martins Beach.

Khosla bought the secluded crescent-shaped property just south of Half Moon Bay for \$32 million in 2008 then closed the gates to the beach that was once open for nearly a century to the public for a small parking fee. The venture capitalist recently lost an appeal to the California Supreme Court which upheld

a San Mateo County judge's ruling that he violated the Coastal Act when he altered the intensity of the land's use without securing a permit.

That case, filed by the Surfrider Foundation, was preceded by another local activist group also filing a lawsuit and followed by several pieces of legislation. Khosla's attorneys have insinuated they're willing to take the matter all the way to the U.S. Supreme Court, meaning the battle is far from over.

### **Securing the beach**

Horsley said the notion that Tunitas Creek could fall into a similar predicament fueled their desire to secure access to the beach and officials are grateful the former owner was willing to sell for a reasonable price.

"I don't want a replication of Martins Beach, let's put this in public ownership but at the same time make sure we have rules and regulations in place to protect this fragile environment," Horsley said. "It may cost the county about \$1 million a year to operate it, but I think it's well worth it. I think the public deserves to have an opportunity to enjoy this spectacular park. This is really Northern California at its best."