

Published September 12th, 2012

Saving State Parks, Open Spaces Point of Discussion at LLLC

By Lou Fancher



Cyclists enjoy the outdoors at Briones Regional Park in Lafayette. Photo Jennifer Wake

An August 28th screening of the documentary *The First 70*, co-hosted by Sustainable Lafayette and the Lafayette Open Space Group at the Lafayette Library and Learning Center, brought together environmental activists, eco-minded hikers and bikers, grassroots neighborhood organizers and remarkably, even people with differing views on the role of government.

United by their increasing concern for California parks, potential foes dropped political posturing to witness the airport-shuttle-bus-turned-RV adventure that three young people filmed in an effort to preserve the state's treasured open spaces.

The First 70, shot in 120 days and funded by a Kickstarter campaign that aimed to raise \$35,500, but ended up with over \$57,000, profiles the 70 parks slated for closure due to state budget cuts.

Opening with time-lapsed views of ocean water, breaking into white foam on towering boulders; gold-tipped evergreens, touched by a setting sun; and families, following trails through fern-filled forests or ogling over antique furniture in a historic home, the filmmakers allow park employees to give voice to their cause.

"If you lose them, you're really poor," one woman says, referring to the proposed closures of one quarter of the state's 279 parks.

The documentary asks a number of questions: What does it mean to close a park? How is a park closed? What are the dangers, the risks, both to the parks themselves and to taxpaying residents?

Expectedly, the answers are grim.

The litany of suggested disasters unfolds against a backdrop of profound beauty, as each park is shown from a down-on-the-ground perspective.

The accumulative message is that the money saved by the closures will be insignificant, in terms of the state's overall budget. Worse, the abandoned parks could fall prey to vandalism, fires and decay. Already, one man says, he is the sole employee in charge of 5,000 acres.

Private businesses and non-profit organizations have stepped in to save some of the parks, the filmmakers announce, offering the first hopeful expression in the approximately 30-minute documentary.

The solution, it seems, is in everyday citizens, like the close to 50 people gathered in LLLC's Community Hall. Ron Brown, Executive Director of Save Mount Diablo, quickly reviewed the history of the non-profit organization he joined 41 years ago, before answering audience questions.

"Will [Governor] Jerry Brown's ballot initiative be enough?" one woman asked.

"If Prop 30 fails, the state of California as we have known it will be no more," Brown predicted. "It will be devastating to us and to state parks. This is me talking, but we're all concerned about the economic viability of the state if it fails."

Brown spoke at length about Mt. Diablo and other open spaces, where declining funds, spread over many years, have allowed roads to deteriorate and precious water reserves to be lost.

"And what is that money in the bottom drawer?" he asked, introducing a topic most people recognized from recent headlines.

In early August, Legislators in Sacramento ordered the state auditor to investigate the Department of Parks and Recreation, which reportedly hid \$54 million in two special funds, while seeking donations from the public to keep parks from closing.

"It's not criminality, it's disfunction," Brown claimed. "There's 54 million and they only needed 11 million, so what are we going to do to make this work?"

One answer came from Donn Walklet, the Vice Chairman of Lafayette Open Space (LOS), the advisory group created by the Lafayette City Council to evaluate open space preservation efforts.

Speaking after a short, breathtakingly gorgeous film featuring the East Bay's 65 regional parks with 40 miles of accessible shoreline, 1,100 miles of trails and 100,000 acres, he said, simply, "We're doing locally what the state should be doing."

Neighborhood by neighborhood, LOS is helping communities preserve the area's open spaces.

Asked what citizens could do to help, his answer was direct and unadorned. "Find out who owns the land. Then call on us. Nothing happens without citizen involvement. We can't depend on the state or federal government to save us."

The evening ended with the audience clustering in small groups as Walklet and Brown looked on. Having planted the seed, they hope that ordinary citizens may grow into a powerful means by which state parks will be saved.

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