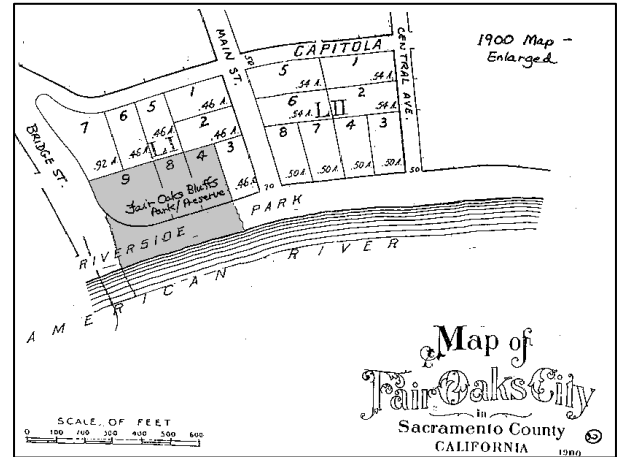


The Effort to Save the Bluff

The “Fair Oaks Bluff” includes the last remaining piece of “Riverside Park”, a 100-foot-wide corridor of a planned public open space stretching along the Bluff for almost a mile in Fair Oaks. The Park had been the far-sighted vision of the early planners of Fair Oaks. Over the years, however, the corridor was broken up as pieces of it fell into private ownership and homes were built along the Bluff. The public recreation easement that remained along the edge of the Bluff had shrunk to a 600 foot long strip, ranging from 18 to 62 feet wide, which was accessible to the public only by a narrow, steep trail up from Bridge Street. The story of preserving this last piece of Riverside Park, and the open space adjacent to it, is a dramatic and inspiring tale of vision and determination by dedicated individuals as well as an entire community.



The now protected area of the Fair Oaks Bluff (shaded part in this piece of an early map of Fair Oaks) includes a small section of Riverside Park.

Since the 1970's, disputes had come up over title to this remaining open space, and one case had gone to litigation in April 1996. It was instigated by a developer and the owner of property adjacent to the Bluffs who wanted the County to abandon the right to its road easement in the area and to decree that the property belongs not to the public, but to them. The plaintiffs lost their case when the judge ruled that the County still owned the road easement.



“Old Friends” - the popular blue oak on the Bluff overlooks the Fair Oaks Bridge in this work of local artist Hugh Gorman.

Neighbors and other Fair Oaks residents knew the Bluff area in question as a longtime community gathering place and as an asset cherished for the tranquility found there. Many came to the bluff to paint, photograph, meditate or observe wildlife. It was considered the “Crown Jewel” of the American River Parkway because of the spectacular panoramic view that it offered from 100 feet or more above the river. A large Blue Oak, which juts out over the edge of the Bluff, became a popular local landmark.

The citizens began to realize that something needed to be done before the land fell entirely into private hands and consequent development. A group of them joined forces with other Parkway protector organizations in the fall of 1998 to try to preserve the Bluff and adjacent open area for the community. They called themselves “Friends of the Fair Oaks Bluffs”.

In October 1998, after appeals and hearings on many related issues, the court made a tentative decision to grant the property owners “fee title ownership” of the bluffs to the low water mark of the river, but preserved the road easement and the public recreational easement along the edge of the Bluff.

More meetings and hearings were held to define, clarify and argue ownership and easement issues. In May of 1999, a resolution appeared to have been reached when the County

Supervisors gave a “conceptual approval” to the request by the private owners to abandon the county’s road easement on their property, now held by a development group calling itself the Bluff View Limited Partnership. In exchange, a wider public access along Bridge Street and along the edge of the Bluff between Bridge and Main Streets would be created. This compromise action disappointed those on both sides of the issue, but legal roadblocks were cleared up and the plaintiffs received clearance to develop the land in March 2000. The property, which had been appraised for \$1.2 million, was being prepared by the developers for sale as three residential lots.

This action led one of the abutting neighbors, Tracy Martin Shearer, a young wife and mother who had grown up in the area and had spent a lot of time on the Bluffs as a child, to found Citizens to Save the Bluffs (CSB) in March of 2000. Her goal was to coalesce the group of neighbors and others who loved the Bluffs to raise funds to purchase the 4.5 acre property and save it from development.

Through the auspices of the non-profit Sacramento Valley Open Space Conservancy (SVOC), CSB soon received a \$250,000 grant from the Raley Foundation and a tentative pledge of \$250,000 from the County. The group negotiated with Bluff View Limited Partnership for a purchase option that would allow CSB to continue to raise the remaining funds without the threat of imminent development looming. But there was a time limit. CSB had until February 1, 2001, or the developers would withdraw their agreement.

CSB then began the daunting task of raising the remaining \$700,000 needed to complete the deal. Along with Friends of the Fair Oaks Bluffs, CSB was aided by a number of local and environmental groups and the County and Fair Oaks park agencies. It was then clarified that, after the purchase, the County would take ownership of the property and make the area part of the American River Parkway to further protect the Bluff.

By the February 1, 2001 deadline, CSB had raised only \$135,000 in additional funds, but with donations still coming in, it was hoped that a new deadline could be worked out with the property owners. On March 12, a new purchase agreement was signed with the owners, who extended the deadline to May 1. Fundraising efforts continued, but “donor burnout” and a lagging economy seemed to be stalling the campaign.

In early June 2001, with \$735,000 in total of pledges and donations, CSB negotiated the purchase of half the property, including the lot that would allow access from Bridge Street and tie in with the public land along the edge of the Bluff. With the patient cooperation of the sellers and encouragement from people in the community, CSB continued the fundraising effort for the \$465,000 needed to purchase the remaining piece of the property by the new deadline of January 1, 2002.

By mid December, CSB had raised \$195,000 towards this final purchase. The group made but was thwarted in an attempt to obtain a seven-year loan on the balance, and now it was only days away from the deadline.

A response by the community to the story and an urgent mail solicitation generated almost \$20,000 within a week. Not wanting to be “the Grinch that stole Christmas”, the property owners contemplated another extension of that deadline. They relented yet again, and a final deadline was set for the end of January.

With a solid consensus to preserve the Bluffs, the Board of the Fair Oaks Park District (FORPD) stepped in and combined efforts with the County and other community groups and individuals to put together and co-sign a two year loan for the \$326,000 that was now needed (including fees and deposits). It was stipulated that no money would come out of the district's general fund to repay the loan. The loan and purchase papers were signed on January 31, 2002, the final deadline to purchase the land.

The fundraising effort resumed, but by mid-December 2003, CSB still owed \$175,000 on the loan, with the pending due date in early February 2004. CSB turned again to the FORPD. Rather than renegotiate the loan, the Board voted, after some debate, to pay off the balance on the loan using funds that had come from the sale of surplus property, along with funds from the pending sale of another.

CSB committed to continue raising money to fund Bluff improvements and help FORPD pay off the loan while awaiting the pending excess property sale. The group also reiterated its plan to create a long promised Donor Plaza at the site to recognize major financial contributors to the cause of saving the Bluff. The cost of that project and who would pay the bill was yet to be resolved.

Four years after the effort by CSB to save the Bluff began, and after raising most of the \$1.2 million asking price for the property and securing the land from the threat of development, a ribbon cutting ceremony was held on June 6, 2004 to celebrate the tentative success. Vulnerability to a default on the FORPD loan still loomed, however.

In late July, Sacramento County Supervisors settled a fencing issue, and a fence was installed later that year on the north and east property lines of the preserve. Fundraising efforts continued.

In late December 2004, the nearly six year effort by the community to preserve the Bluff property came to a successful conclusion when the FORPD Board announced that it had received two important gifts for the cause: a \$35,000 check from the Sacramento County Board of Supervisors and a major donation from a Fair Oaks couple, Gerry and Karen Kamilos. With these, and an additional \$15,000 from FORPD, enough funds were finally available to pay off the Fair Oaks Bluff loan.

Fair Oaks Bluff Ribbon Cutting Ceremony, June 6, 2004

Photos by Guy Galante and Subhash Chand



Through the effort of many individuals and several public and private entities, the 4.5 acres of Bluff land will remain in a natural state for future generations to enjoy. It is the vision of CSB that the Bluff area will provide a safe habitat for the native wildlife and an opportunity for all visitors to experience a little of the rich natural history of the area.

The Donor Plaza

Additional funds were subsequently raised to proceed with the planning and construction of the Fair Oaks Bluff Donor Plaza. After many delays and undergoing reviews for compliance under both the new American River Parkway Plan and an Environmental Impact Report, the project was approved by state and local government agencies. Once plans were finalized and negotiated with pertinent agencies, a contractor was hired and construction of the plaza finally began in early September, 2011.

The Plaza was designed by and built under the direction of local artist Hugh Gorman. It is paved with engraved bricks recognizing our generous donors. The plaza features a river rock wall with an imbedded Bluff Benefactor Monument which recognizes the major donors who made the purchase of the Bluff possible. Specially selected rocks along the wall offer seating areas to rest on. A drinking fountain provides, for visitors and their canine companions, refreshment that originated from the river along which the plaza nestles. Signs across the street from the plaza tell the curious of the natural and human history of the area, as well as just how that water got to the drinking fountain. It is hoped that the Plaza will serve as a peaceful and lovely resting area for visitors who have enjoyed a walk or bike ride along the American River Parkway, or who are just stopping by to enjoy a quite moment near the beautiful Fair Oaks Bluff.

SUPPORTERS

We are grateful to the following people, organizations, and institutions for their support in the effort to save the Fair Oaks Bluff:

- * Fair Oaks Recreation & Park District
- * Sac. County Dept. of Regional Parks, Rec. & Open Space
- * Sacramento County Board of Supervisors
- * Sacramento Valley Conservancy
- * American River Bank
- * Save the American River Association
- * Senator Deborah Ortiz
- * Senator Dave Cox
- * Assembly member Roger Niello
- * Supervisor Roberta MacGlashan
- * American River Natural History Association
- * American River Parkway Foundation
- * Fair Oaks Chamber of Commerce
- * Fair Oaks Rotary Club