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## John Sutter, Bay Area environmental champion, retiring



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East Bay Regional Park District board member John Sutter, left, surveys a land tract the district was considering purchasing in a 2005 file photo. With Sutter are fellow board member Beverly Lawe and district employee Bob Doyle. (Bob Popping/Bay Area News Group archive)

By DENIS CUFF | dcuff@bayareanews.com | Bay Area News Group  
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OAKLAND — John Sutter developed an appreciation for the outdoors as a boy when his parents took family trips to the Sierra, escaping the busy industrial life of Oakland for campgrounds surrounded by majestic, tree-covered mountains.

At a time when the Bay Area's natural jewels were being swallowed up in a rush to build, being up close to nature, Sutter said, helped nurture his belief that it's not enough for urban areas to offer jobs, commerce and housing; they also should offer open space and parks.

He got a chance to put his words into action in 1965 when Sutter, then a 31-year-old lawyer, was appointed by Gov. Pat Brown to the original state commission established to stop a shrinking San Francisco Bay from being filled in with dirt and rock to make land for development.

This year Sutter, now 88, was still in the thick of San Francisco Bay conservation efforts, serving on a panel that secured voter passage of a \$12 annual parcel tax on every Bay Area home to save the bay from rising sea levels.

In the 60 years in between, Sutter has been a lion in Bay Area environmental causes aimed at protecting the bay, forests, parks, shorelines, open spaces and trails that bring Bay Area residents closer to nature.

"There are many current features of the Bay Area that would not be there for the public to enjoy if not for the tireless efforts of John Sutter," said Pat O'Brien, the former general manager of the East Bay Regional Park District. "The breadth and duration of his work is remarkable."

Among his most celebrated accomplishments is the establishment in the late 1970s of the 741-acre Martin Luther King Regional Shoreline in Oakland, an oasis near the busy port and airport where Sutter likes to hike and watch ducks swim as herons wade in marshes.

As far back as 1967, Sutter had the foresight to jump-start planning for a greenbelt at one of the Bay Area's most iconic spots — the foot of the Bay Bridge. He wrote a letter asking for part of the Oakland Army Base to be turned into a public park if the base should ever close, as has occurred. The idea took root, and several state and regional agencies now are planning the multimillion-dollar Gateway Regional Park.

"Sometimes you can get a lot done with perseverance and a little luck," Sutter said.

Colleagues say Sutter has accomplished much with so little fanfare and ego that his work is not readily known outside the circle of environmental agencies and groups. They describe him as cordial, smart, understated and tenacious.

Sutter, who worked as a prosecutor, private attorney and 14 years as an Alameda County Superior Court judge, also was elected for three terms on the Oakland City Council and is finishing his fifth term on the East Bay Regional Park District board.

This fall he plans to retire from the park district board after more than 20 years with the agency, marking the end of a long career defined by his efforts to protect some of the Bay Area's most scenic spots.

Sutter took his first foray into environmental politics in the late 1950s more than a decade before America's first Earth Day in 1970.

To be sure, protecting San Francisco Bay has been a major focus for Sutter, a Stanford Law School graduate who grew up in Oakland. He still lives there with his wife Ellie.

Some campaigns took years or decades to bear fruit.

In the 1960s, Sutter headed the board of an environmental group now called the Greenbelt Alliance, which elevated concerns about loss of open space to urban sprawl.

Sutter also worked on campaigns in the 1960s to stop Oakland from building a parking garage on city park land near Lake Merritt, and to block a hotel in another park area with a nature museum.

"People have to continue to fight for their parks at all levels," he said.

Colleagues say Sutter is effective because of his thoughtful, well researched arguments and his even temperament that tolerates people with opposing views.

"John has a very thoughtful way of examining different sides of proposals, and presenting it in a very credible way," said Doug Siden, a fellow longtime member of the regional park board.

Sutter is known in government circles for reading staff reports from top to bottom and calling out planners and administrators for gaps in their reasoning.

"John Sutter is a man of few but carefully chosen words," said David Lewis, the executive director of Save San Francisco Bay. "He is tenacious without being mean. He takes the long view in that he realizes people's views may change over time, or that the people in those positions may retire or be replaced by other people."

When he retires from public office, Sutter said he expects to travel more. But he added he will continue his work to increase public access to the Oakland shoreline and expand the Bay Trail around 500 miles of shoreline through nine counties.

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**John Sutter**  
Home: Oakland  
Age: 88  
Public involvement: Sutter has championed many environmental campaigns and initiatives over six decades to protect and or expand open space, city and regional parks, trails, and the San Francisco Bay environment.  
He retires this fall from the East Bay Regional Park Board after 20 years in office.  
He also is retiring this fall from the San Francisco Bay Restoration Authority, which won approval from Bay Area voters in June for a \$12 parcel assessment to restore bay wetlands and protect them from rising sea levels.  
He was appointed in 1965 to serve on the first San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission, which was created to protect the bay from filling and to expand public access to the shoreline.  
He served on the Oakland City Council from 1971 to 1982.  
He cofounded a group, now known as the Greenbelt Initiative, which elevated open space concerns in city, county and regional planning.  
Work: Served as an Alameda County deputy district attorney, a private attorney and an Alameda County Superior Court judge.  
Education: Graduated from Oakland High School, Harvard University, Stanford Law School  
Awards: Awarded the prestigious Cornelius Pagsley Award and the Legends in the Field of Parks and Recreation Award in 2016 by the American Academy for Parks and Recreation Administration.

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**Denis Cuff** Denis Cuff covers environmental, water, and outdoor recreation news for the Bay Area News Group.  
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