
Citizens' Advisory Committee

Memo-24-25
Meeting SP 24-04
September 23, 2024

To: Citizens' Advisory Committee
From: Marc Landgraf, Assistant General Manager
Subject: Honoring Larry Coons, the First General Manager for the Open Space Authority

REVENUE/COST

There is no cost associated with this item.

BACKGROUND

Amidst a growing wave of support from passionate community advocates dedicated to preserving the intrinsic natural beauty of Santa Clara Valley, in July 1994, Larry Coons stepped into the position of general manager at the Santa Clara County Open Space Authority (Authority) - now known as the Santa Clara Valley Open Space Authority.

Sadly, Larry passed away on April 1, 2024.

DISCUSSION

Larry's significant contributions to the Authority began in July 1994 and continued through July 1999, a tenure during which he played a vital role in furthering the conservation efforts of South Bay's natural and working landscapes. Under Larry's leadership, the vision of a dedicated few evolved into a tangible reality through strong partnerships, scientific exploration and locally driven decision-making.

As the first general manager of the Open Space Authority, Larry spearheaded a series of strategic transactions to address the challenge of raising funds amidst tax restrictions. In 1992, the Santa Clara County Open-Space Authority Act (Pub. Res. Code, § 35100 et seq.) created the Authority, with the purpose of acquiring and preserving open space within the county to prevent the conversion of land to urban uses, to preserve quality of life and to support agriculture. The act provided no method to fund open space acquisitions but authorized the agency to levy special assessments under the Streets and Highways Code. (Pub. Res. Code, § 35173.)

To overcome the funding hurdle, Larry worked with supporters to create a benefit assessment district. In 1994, the Board approved the formation of Assessment District 1, which levies an assessment of \$12 on single family homes and an adjusted rate on commercial and industrial properties, providing \$4 million in revenues annually. This demonstration of strong public support and the ethic Larry established of living up to promises made to the public opened the door for future funding opportunities. In fact, two decades down the road, Measure Q was passed by voters to generate approximately \$7.9 million

per year for open space protection, and then Measure T six years later that established a permanent renewal of Measure Q with 81% support.

In his final year with the Open Space Authority, Larry's leadership saw to the permanent protection of the Palassou Ridge property. Palassou Ridge became the very first property safeguarded by the Open Space Authority. Spanning over 3,524 acres, this land serves as a vital habitat for the California red legged frogs and California tiger salamanders and connects Coyote Lake-Harvey Bear County Park with Henry Coe State Park. Its historical significance includes a charming stone house and a noteworthy connection to the Anza Expedition of the late 1700s. Larry's partnership with The Nature Conservancy played a crucial role in making this preservation effort a reality. The Authority contributed \$1.5 million towards the \$6.3 million purchase, further demonstrating the agency's commitment to conservation. The acquisition of Rancho Cañada del Oro was another strategic conservation vision that came to reality thanks to Larry's visionary role within the agency. The purchase was completed in December of 2000, and it marked an important collaborative effort involving the Peninsula Open Space Trust (POST), the Authority, Santa Clara County Parks, and the City of San Jose.

Rancho Cañada del Oro Open Space Preserve is now open to the public year-round, encompassing 5,675 acres, and making forward progress towards Larry's vision of future trail connections, including the iconic Bay Area Ridge Trail. With over 12 miles of trails, including two accessible loop trails, visitors are greeted with spectacular views of the Diablo Range and Mt. Hamilton as they enjoy scenic meadows, native oak trees and creek-side habitats. This beloved preserve now serves as a local and regional amenity and is an important piece of the network of protected lands in the area.

The continuing legacy of Larry Coons encompasses not only the protection of open spaces but also the cultivation of a deeper connection between people and the environment, particularly in urban settings across the Santa Clara Valley.

To improve quality of life in nearby neighborhoods, Larry helped spearhead the Authority grant funding program for nature-based initiatives in urban areas of Santa Clara Valley. Since 1997, this grant program, referred to as the "20% Grant Program," has set aside 20% of the Authority's capital expenditures from its original benefit assessment district for urban open space projects. Funds are allocated to participating cities within the Authority's jurisdiction and the County of Santa Clara. In 1999, the first grants were distributed under the agency's 20% Funding Program, for land acquisition, environmental restoration, and other enhancements in the cities of San José and Santa Clara.

After 40 years of public service, Larry Coons left a lasting mark on all who had the privilege of working with him. His dedication to serving the public with integrity and compassion was unparalleled. Larry's commitment to fairness was not just a principle, but a way of life that inspired those around him to strive for excellence. His unwavering honesty and genuine concern for others set him apart as a beacon of integrity. Larry's ability to build and nurture strong teams was a testament to his leadership skills and his belief in the power of collaboration. His legacy will continue to inspire future generations of leaders within the Open Space Authority to uphold the values he held dear.

This item was originally presented to the Authority Board of Directors on September 12, 2024.

RECOMMENDATION

This is an informational item. No action is recommended.