

Open space group seeks assurance from East P.A.



JUDITH CALSON — MERCURY NEWS

East Palo Alto wants to buy Cooley Landing, but the current owner, Peninsula Open Space Trust, wants a say in how the land will be used.

TWO SIDES SEEK TO HAMMER OUT AGREEMENT TO PRESERVE OPEN SPACE AT COOLEY LANDING

By **Thai Walker**
Mercury News

The secluded spoon-shaped spit of bayshore land known as Cooley Landing in East Palo Alto has long been an object of desire among city officials. Behind closed doors, they've talked of someday owning this serene spot and turning it into a place where residents could go to unwind.

That vision, on the surface at least, is consistent with that of the Peninsula Open Space Trust (POST), the current owner of Cooley Landing, which has said it is willing to sell. And the philanthropic Packard Foundation has said it is willing to buy the land — valued at more than \$1 million — and hand it over to the cash-strapped city.

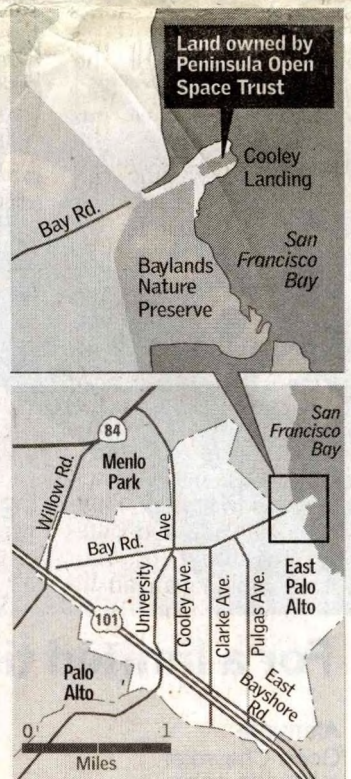
It would seem, then, that everyone is in agreement about Cooley Landing. Instead, the conversation about this land deal, which has heated up in recent weeks, has been somewhat tense and delicate, marked by the question of who should have a say in how it will be used

someday. This question has given rise to a subtle tug-of-war between POST and the city over the six-acre site.

For POST, the conversation revolves around the preservation of the land. The trust bought Cooley Landing in 1999 from a private citizen who had made it his home for more than 25 years. The non-profit trust's purpose, said POST President Audrey Rust, was to save the wind-swept place where red-winged blackbirds soar and swoop and jackrabbits and pheasants run wild.

POST has made a crusade of saving open space since 1977 and has often purchased lands and then sold them to public agencies. It has always known of East Palo Alto's interest in acquiring the site and wants to help the city turn Cooley Landing, now off-limits to the public, into "something that provides civic pride," Rust said.

But POST intends to have some say about the future use of the land before



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The Packard Foundation has offered to buy six acres of open space and donate it to the city of East Palo Alto, but first the city and the Peninsula Open Space Trust must agree about its future use.

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selling it.

"Let's hope we all have the same idea," Rust said about discussions with East Palo Alto. "It's just a beautiful place, and it is pretty central to protected lands that are to the north and south of it."

Years ago, there was idle talk in East Palo Alto of building up Cooley Landing with a casino, some blues bars, maybe a convention center or a marina. But talk to city officials today about how the land should be used and they echo POST's words.

Providing for city's need

The city's purchase of Cooley Landing, City Manager Monika Hudson said, "would mean adding six acres of open space to a city that has a drought" of such land. Ideas include walking trails, a concession stand, a nature center and maybe even a dock from which to rent paddle boats.

Even so, the conversation about this bit of land has taken on additional significance for city leaders. It is a discussion unavoidably colored by the city's perpetual pursuit of self-determination.

This is, after all, a city that has repeatedly endured neighboring communities weighing in whenever the city announces new development plans, East Palo Alto officials say. The city may agree with POST, but it wants to be the one to define how the land will be used.

"It has been my experience that sometimes the desires of the East Palo Alto community are not respected and that sometimes people approach us

with the 'we know better than you,' " council member Sharifa Wilson said.

"That is something we have really been working hard to establish," she said, "that we are very intelligent people who give things a lot of thought and care. We don't necessarily need someone else telling us what to do."

Cooley Landing lies in the city's industrial area, at the end of a road that turns from asphalt to gravel as it runs past salvage yards and soaring power-line towers. In the 1880s, Cooley Landing was a vital port from which ships laden with lumber and goods set off down the bay. In the 1950s, it was a dump overseen by a rotund man nicknamed "the Captain."

Most recently, it was owned by Carl Schoof, who put a house on the land and spent his days restoring boats. In 1999, Schoof and his wife retired and put the land up for sale. Reached in Arizona, Shirley Schoof said she and her husband are aware of the wranglings over Cooley Landing but don't want to talk about their former home.

"It was a peaceful place and it was good while it lasted," she said, "but now we've moved on."

When Cooley Landing was put up for sale, East Palo Alto approached the Packard Foundation about a grant. Packard liked the city's idea of turning the land into public open space.

The discussion got sticky, though, when then-Mayor R.B. Jones, who liked to talk big, started throwing out some other ideas. Among them: What about turning Cooley

Landing into a replica of Beale Street, Memphis' famous strip for blues and barbecue?

"At that point, I said, 'No, our deal is, we will make a grant if it will be used for public recreation purposes,'" said Hugh Burroughs, director of external affairs for Packard at the time. "I told them, 'If you want to use Cooley Landing for other purposes, you're free to do that, but not with Packard money.'"

POST buys in

POST entered the conversation as a "facilitator" at Packard's invitation, Burroughs said. The idea, he said, was to have POST buy and hold the land until the city and the foundation could "agree on the intent of the original grant offer."

After two years of focusing on other development projects, city officials declared last month that they were ready to pursue Cooley Landing again. This week they met with Packard officials to begin that conversation.

"We look forward to having the city defining what it wants," for Cooley Landing, said Edward Diener, resident counsel for Packard. But he said Packard is staying out of the negotiations. What happens on the land "depends on whatever arrangement" POST and the city "make about transferring the land," he said.

It is a discussion Wilson said the city is ready for.

"I think we can appease any kind of anxiety that POST or Packard might have," she said.

Contact Thaa Walker at twalker@sjmercury.com or (650) 688-7581.