

Latitude 38

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WE GO WHERE THE WIND BLOWS



Three Bridge Fiasco
Polynesia Cruising
YouTube Sailors
Ready Enough

I once tried to go to a City Council meeting to make a public comment, and it was not a good experience. Public comment is supposed to come first, but first there was an interminable debate about the agenda, then another long wait for my turn to speak, and then in my allotted two minutes it seemed as if no one was really paying attention to my relatively obscure issue about marina parking policies. And for all that trouble, after leaving City Hall, I was rewarded with a parking ticket.

There's a much better way to make individual opinions known to public officials: Attend a ribbon-cutting ceremony. These are usually lightly attended affairs, especially if the park or project that was just completed is one that didn't involve much public controversy. The government officials often outnumber the public, so while everyone waits for the mayor to show up and the speeches to begin, there's easy access to the commissioners, councilmembers, supervisors, representatives, staff and local advocates who are obliged to be there.

That was the case at a recent ribbon cutting for a new waterfront mini-park and "water access point" on shoreline land near a major freeway. It was a joint project by Caltrans, the regional park district, the multi-county Water Trail, and the city. It had taken about 12 years to get from the plan approval to the opening ceremony.

After a very productive conversation about improving marina parking with the assistant city manager, I noticed an SUV with a bunch of windsurfer boards on the roof rack driving across the grass between the access road and the water. The bumper sticker read: "If this were easy, they'd call it kiteboarding." The SUV came to a stop on a gravel patch close to the beach, among a gaggle of other large vehicles with boards and roof racks. The small lot was full anyway.

I was not too surprised when Lee Helm piled out of the vehicle along with about a half-dozen sailors. She spotted me right away.

"Yo, Max!" she waved. "Wind's up!"

"Uh, kowabunga!" I answered, using the only surfing jargon I knew.

"Like, what brings you to Annette's Secret Surfin' Spot?" she asked when I walked over to see what sort of gear she was sailing these days.

"It's the official ribbon-cutting ceremony for this new park," I informed her.

"That's interesting," she replied.

"We've been launching here for years, especially when the tide is too low for some of the other sites. The kiteboard-

ers too. It's, like, one of the few places within miles that has good wind, and also a long enough stretch of beach to lay out the kite strings."

"Funny," I said, looking at the park site plan that had been distributed to all the people attending the event. "The plan calls for a kayak put-in, funded by the Water Trail project, but it doesn't say anything about windsurfing or kiteboarding."

"Clueless bureaucrats," she shrugged. "The plan was probably first approved before I was born. Maybe even before you were born. And, like, there's way too much inertia in the public process to adapt to any major change in use, even though the windsurfers have been here for at least five years."

"The plan does show basketball courts as part of this park," I said.

"Yeah, right. Nothing like prioritizing water-related uses," she said. "Another brilliant design driven by park advocates and planners who want us all to come down to look at the water, but don't want anyone to actually touch it or float on it. Look at the actual shoreline: All artificial rock, except for the nice beach that formed all by itself after the freeway was built on this landfill."

Meanwhile, Lee had assembled her wetsuit, harness and related gear on the tailgate of the SUV, and threw a huge beach towel over herself, except for her head.

"I think the big disconnect between water access opportunities and public funding agencies is the failure to recognize the importance of organizational and social design along with physical design," she said as articles of clothing began to emerge from under the towel, while the wetsuit went in. "Launch and landing sites are the stated priority for the Water Trail planners. But, like, that misses the point."

Lee was, apparently, skilled and practiced at putting on her wetsuit under a towel, and didn't miss a beat with her rant.

"Any site development project or funding program that's serious about actually broadening access," she explained,



"needs to prioritize on-site storage and group ownership opportunities. I mean, look at existing resources: People with boats and cars do not have an access problem. There are good places to launch everywhere, if you can transport your boat or board there by car. Access needs to reach the people who can't afford their own boats or don't have a garage or driveway to store it in, which is, like,

"This made me wonder if windsurfers routinely pee in their wetsuits."

just about everyone I know. Water access plans need to prioritize on-site storage, and especially they need to facilitate the formation of new volunteer-based low-cost clubs and co-ops. University Sailing clubs, outrigger, rowing and dragon boat clubs, just for example, provide awesome access ops at awesomely low cost."

"I don't think there's any provision for

CUTTING THE RIBBON



Parks like this one claim to provide water access, but there's no on-site storage and no support for the sailing or paddling clubs that are necessary to make waterborne activities accessible to the public at low cost.

on-site storage in this project," I noted.

"And a good thing, too!" interjected an older woman whom I recognized as one of the park advocates from the City Council meeting. She had probably come over to scold the windsurfers for driving on the grass.

"Fencing off an area for boat storage would be privatizing public open space," she asserted. "This is part of tidelands public trust. It's for the public, not some private boating club."

She glanced back at the assembly of city and county officials, which included some uniformed police officers who she apparently thought were following her over to the illegally parked vehicles to write some citations.

"Windsurfers and kiteboarders are the only people who ever use this part of the park," Lee pointed out. "It's, like, much too close to the freeway noise to be an attractive setting for a picnic."

The older woman stomped back to talk to the police officers again.

"She can't see beyond the low water

mark," Lee observed. "The real open space resource here is the water, not the land. Sure, we would have to fence off a couple hundred square feet for a secure place to store our gear. But it would open up hundreds of square miles of Bay to a demographic that can't afford to get out on the water any other way, except through a volunteer-based nonprofit club."

By now the wetsuit was entirely inside the towel. Most of Lee's clothing was outside the towel, and even through the towel I could tell how she was contorting to get herself inside the snug-fitting neoprene.

"At least the new bathrooms and changing rooms will serve all users," I suggested. "Even the land-bound types."

"Who needs a bathroom?" Lee said between grunts, as she struggled to pull the wetsuit over her shoulders and get everything properly adjusted. "What we need is a freshwater washdown hose. And parking closer to the water."

This made me wonder if windsurfers

routinely pee in their wetsuits.

"What about the subsidized sailing centers?" I asked. "They seem to do a good job of bringing sailing to the masses."

"Well funded public programs — like the Lake Merritt boathouse or Treasure Island Sailing Center — are also very good. But, like, as soon as there is paid staff, the costs go way up . . . if not to the end user, then to the funding source. They don't scale. The all-volunteer groups provide by far the best access for the least cost to the user and least cost to the public. Something to do with slave labor, I guess."

Now almost fully installed in her wetsuit, she threw off the big towel. "Can you do my back zipper?"

I pulled the zipper up to the collar, completing the installation.

"Then there are the commercial boat rental places," she said as she wrapped her clothes in the towel and put them back in the SUV.

"You probably don't think much of them," I guessed.

"Commercial concessions are, like, totally out of it," Lee confirmed my guess. "The prices charged by a commercial kayak or sailboat rental op might seem OK to you upscale grown-ups, but it's out of reach to everyone else. Way beyond the budget of us starving college students, for sure. The clubs and co-ops smash this barrier. Public service and community outreach is part of the DNA of the volunteer-based clubs. The only subsidy they need to thrive is to be left alone on some public land."

I noticed another van drive in and park illegally on the grass. This one had a blue placard hanging from the rear-view mirror, and when the back of the van opened I watched the elevator lower a young man on a wheelchair down to the surface.

"He's going to have a rough time of it," I thought. "The ADA ramp is in the plan, but it's not installed yet. And parked on the grass, the chair is not going to roll very well."

My fears were unjustified. About six kayakers put down the boats they were carrying to the beach and picked up the chair, carrying it over some concrete steps and then down a steep rocky embankment to the beach. A few seconds later he was lifted from the chair and deposited in the front seat of a double kayak. It was all done so quickly and smoothly, it was clear that this group of friends had been through the same drill many times before.

"Physical ADA access is fine," Lee

pointed out, "but it's really the group dynamic that makes the access both possible and worthwhile for the disabled. This kid don' need no steenkin' ADA ramp. He don' need one for any other boating activity. That's 'cause there isn't a paddling, rowing or sailing club anywhere in the known universe that wouldn't happily carry a wheelchair down a ramp or over a few stairs. But with no group, no club, no social infrastructure, the access is not just difficult, it's mostly pointless."

Lee's rant was not over. As she unbuckled her board from the roof rack, she exposed more "bureaucratic lubberly cluelessness" in the form of protected monopolies for commercial concessions in parks. "They are terrified, just terrified, of allowing a public-serving non-profit org to 'compete' with an overpriced rental operation. It's, like, criminal the way it closes off low-cost access. I mean, I can think of a couple of sailing clubs that run side-by-side with highly-subsidized sailing centers or boat rental businesses, and the proximity, like, always improves business for both. Gives the public more choice, adds redundancy to safety resources, and lots of other good synergistic effects. Writing an exclusive use contract for boat rental business should be a high crime."

Now Lee went to work on her rig, unrolling the sail, sliding in the mast, clamping on the booms and adjusting the outhaul and downhaul tension.

"As a practical strategy, Cal Boating and Waterways and other funding agencies should give major consideration to how any marina development, rebuild or maintenance project will also accommodate the clubs and co-ops that make the low-cost access possible. On-site storage for hand-launched boats is critical. It's, like, the first step to encouraging these organizations to form."

"And if your gear were stored here," I suggested, "you wouldn't all have to drive

these gas-guzzlers to bring your stuff to the water."

"Plus we could come here straight from work or class, no extra mileage to go home first to get the boards and rigs, no extra carbon footprint. Every marina can find a good place for kayak or board storage. And, like, to be useful to everyone, especially the older kayakers, it's gotta be down on the docks, where sliding the boat a few feet into the water is all it takes. Not up in the parking lot where it's a major schlep, and where it would disqualify a lot of people who are not physically up to the task of lugging

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a luggable boat up a ramp, even if it's on wheels. Also, they gotta make the inside ties available for berthing small boats of all kinds. There are usually lots of unmarketable inside-tie dock spaces sitting empty in any marina. Human-powered boats can even go under a gangway to get to a berth that no one else can use; perfect for dragon boats. Offer the space, and the club will form around the first batch of users."

"Dragon boats, yes!" added another



A visitor to these parks can look at the water, but to float on it, they will need their own boat, a vehicle to transport it and a driveway or garage to store it. Park planners are good at maximizing uses of open space on land, but they don't seem to know how to provide access to the real open space resource: the water.

windsurfer who was carrying what I surmised to be a very sophisticated and expensive set of carbon hydrofoils for his board. "Dragon boat clubs are far and away the best public access bang for the marina dock space buck. The economics are favorable, the numbers of participants are big, and the required skill for safe operation is low." He was describing the exact opposite of the activity he was about to engage in.

"Dragon boats are especially compatible," he continued, "with unskilled

school, camp or youth group outings, and just one or two adults can host a group of 20 kids — a much better ratio than sailing or even kayaking. Paddling lets the kids be full participants right from the first stroke. Sailing just gets them cold, wet, scared, confused and yelled at."

"Only if, like, the grown-ups are doing it all wrong," insisted Lee. "Sailing with kids is just like teaching. First rule is, 'never let them see you sweat.' And, like, know your audience. Beginners are thrilled to be out on the water; they don't need to plane or surf or see what happens when things go wrong with the big spinnaker."

"On the other hand," added the windsurfer, seeming to change course completely, "my first sail, at age five, was on an International 14. I was just amazed at the speed. I was hooked."

"Have you lobbied the politicos here at this ceremony for the policies you're advocating?" I asked as I followed them both down to the water's edge.

"It's a no-brainer," Lee answered. "Marinas depend on low-interest loans from the Division of Boating and Waterways for major maintenance and dock rebuilds. DBW needs to require that support for clubs, co-ops, on-site small craft storage and public outreach be in the plan before any new project is approved. Otherwise they're not really serious about access for the rest of us."

— max ebb