



The Future of the Fort Bragg Mill Site

by Jim Tarbell

Originally published in Real Estate Magazine June 2019

Suddenly, multiple initiatives, now on the table, promise to impact the future of the Mill Site, Fort Bragg and the Northern California Coast.

- The Coastal Trail is complete and for the first time in 150 years, the public has access to Fort Bragg's seashore.
- The Noyo Center is acquiring 11.5 acres in the middle of the Coastal trail and is working on a design for a visitors center.
- Most importantly, the cleanup of the Mill Site toxins is incomplete and the landowner wants to avoid a thorough cleansing of the area.
- Parcels of the Mill Site are being sold to private investors.
- The City has initiated a new Local Coastal Planning Process to determine how much land will be in open space and how much available for development.
- Daylighting Maple and Alder Creeks offers a bright future for Fort Bragg.

Concerned citizens need to be engaged in reuse of the Mill Site. In order to educate and facilitate public participation in the future of the Mill Site, the Mendocino Institute is pre-

senting an array of independent informative programs on the Mill Site including several radio specials on KZYY, and a public forum with UC Berkeley Professor Ignacio Chapela on the Mill Site clean up, climate change and sea level rise at the Caspar Community Center on June 21.

We have also put together this article to give you background material on the history of the Mill Site, the ongoing cleanup and planning for the reuse of the Mill Site and the current status of the various development efforts now taking place on the Mill Site.

HISTORY

In the late 1880s, after cutting through the forests of New England and the upper Mid-West, wealthy, timber-money swept into the quiet woods between the Noyo River and Pudding Creek. Otis Russell Johnson, who "was heavily interested in timber lands and mills in Wisconsin and Michigan," instigated this money-power migration when he financed his 23-year old son's investments in the legendary redwood forests of Northern California. Besides

Otis' lumber interest, he was President of the Union National Bank, and several other companies. He also served as President of the Union Lumber Company. Besides his financial connections he also had elite political ties with US Senators Stockbridge and Sawyers as well as General, Senator and Michigan Governor Russell Alger.

Otis' son, CR Johnson, initially invested Johnson money in a small mill near Westport while he scouted the viability of a larger operation at Fort Bragg Harbor and negotiated the purchase of all the timber up Pudding Creek and the Noyo River. At the time, the main residents of this land were the few remaining members of the She-bal-napomas, Kal-il-na-pomas and the Camebell Poma (Coast Yuki). Their forbearers had lived on this site for eight to ten thousand years Twenty years earlier, most members of these Pomo clans had been force-marched on their own trail of tears over the hills to Round Valley.

Johnson completed the purchase of the land between the Noyo and Pudding Creek within a few years. The indigenous community received nothing for their homeland that had served as the longest permanently settled coastal site in Mendocino County. Over the next 135 years they were moved from

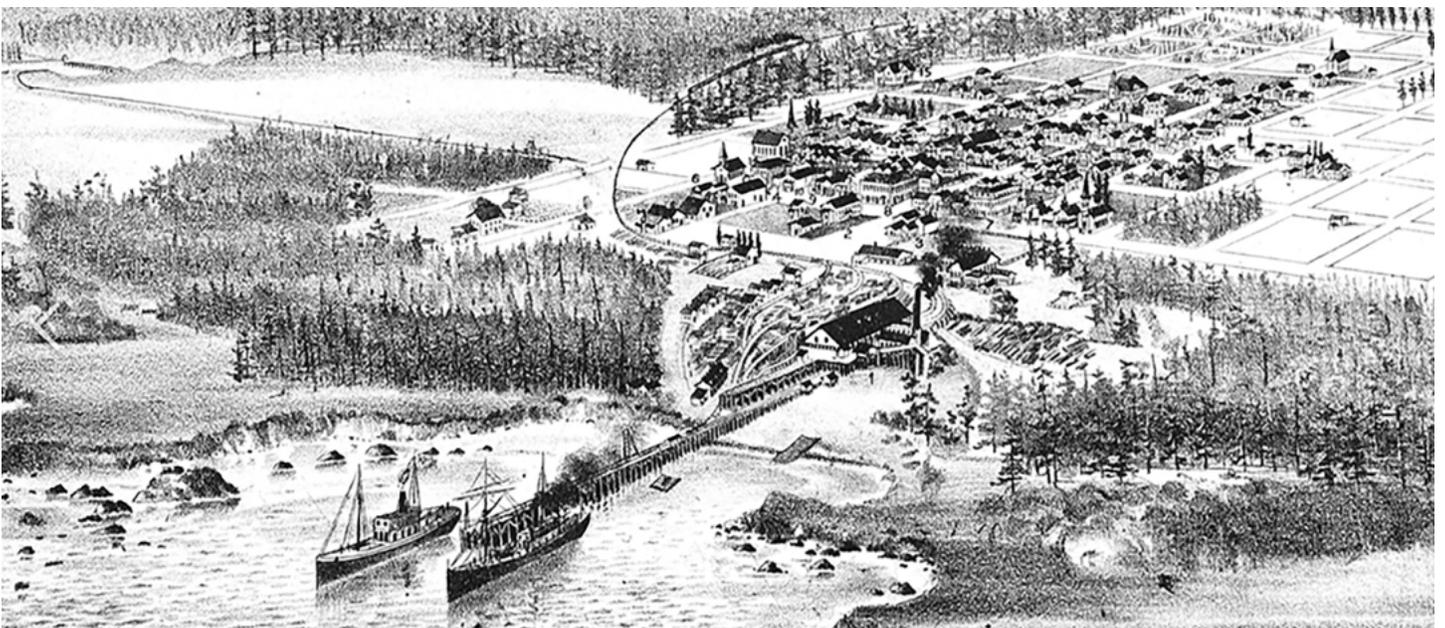
place to place on the mill site due to the Company's needs. At one point they were moved down the beach to make way for a golf course.

By 1885, the Johnson family's Fort Bragg Redwood Company had a mill and railroad operating on the ocean-front and started selling parcels in their new seaside town without a seaside. CR served as the first mayor of the town, beginning a policy of company officials controlling local public policy for over a century.

Financed by wealthy Michigan timber interests and other upper Midwest financial concerns, the company followed the trust -building model sweeping industrial America, buying almost every mill and logging operation from Fort Bragg to the Lost Coast. The Johnsons renamed their formidable lumber trust the Union Lumber Company.

They were, however, fierce opponents of labor unions. CR fought unions for years on the docks in San Francisco and took a defiant stand against them when ever his employees formed a union

In 1903, the Fort Bragg Advocate announced the beginning of one of those efforts in a celebratory manner under the headline "UNION



FORMED." They declared "A union was organized in this place Saturday night for the protection of the laboring men of this coast with membership of something like one hundred and fifty. It is likely that the time is not far distant when all of the Mendocino coast will be unionized." They also reported on a massive union gathering of 1300 people in the city park where 400 men marched up Main Street, the Finnish Sulo Band played and speeches in Finnish, Italian and English rejoiced the formation of the labor union.

CR Johnson immediately declared he would not recognize or negotiate with the union and fired all of the organizers and many of the union members. He also threatened to close the mill for three years sent armed forces out to the lumber camps in the woods to prevent any organizing there.

These actions solidified the remaining union members, who stopped production at the mill by declaring a strike and demanding the company rehire their members and recognize the union. Then 185 union members headed out to the lumber camps, no doubt to discuss with the workers there what had been happening in town.

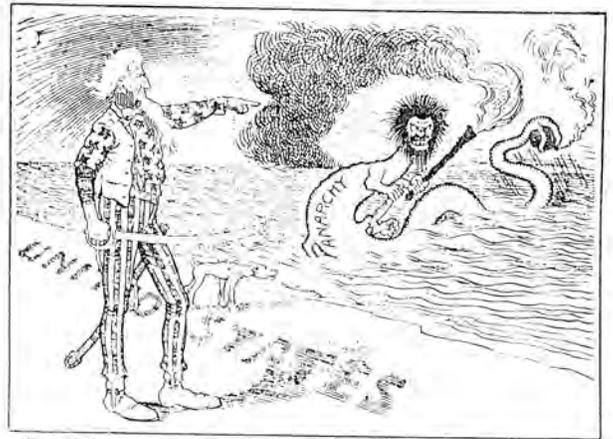
The company sent the City Marshall with an armed posse after them on the company train to assist their private army already in the woods. Caught between the two forces, two union members were shot in the back, some shot in the arm, and other men beaten. No members of the Company's forces were harmed.

Meanwhile, the Advocate now incited the locals with a front-page cartoon of a bomb-throwing anarchist serpent landing on America's shores. The merchants in town, catalyzed by CR's threat to destroy the town economy, declared that the labor union "seemed destined to develop into

Fort Bragg Advocate.

FORT BRAGG, MENDOCINO CO., CAL., WEDNESDAY, MAY 6, 1903

YOU CAN'T LAND HERE!



Copyright 1903

A. W. Johnson

something mischievous and detrimental to the Union Lumber Company's interest and the welfare and business conditions of the citizens and residents of the City of Fort Bragg." In the following weeks the company brought in strikebreakers, reopened the mill, and ran all the union families out of town.

During the depression, Union Lumber Company bought out the Mendocino Lumber Company and all of its forestlands. Then in the 1960s they bought out the massive Pacific Coast Company in Laytonville that had 35,000 acres of land and two mills. By this point, the Union Lumber Company owned 158,000 acres of land, but they were not big enough to compete with the multinational timber corporations that dominated the industry. In January 1969, the Johnson family sold out to Boise Cascade. The company magazine told all the families working for the Company, "We are now Boise Cascadians," indicating they had been sold too.

Then, four years later, Georgia Pacific (G-P), the largest wood products corporation in the world bought the "Union Lumber Region" from Boise

Cascade. This helped instigate the government breakup of G-P, forcing them to spin off many of their assets to the newly formed Louisiana Pacific.

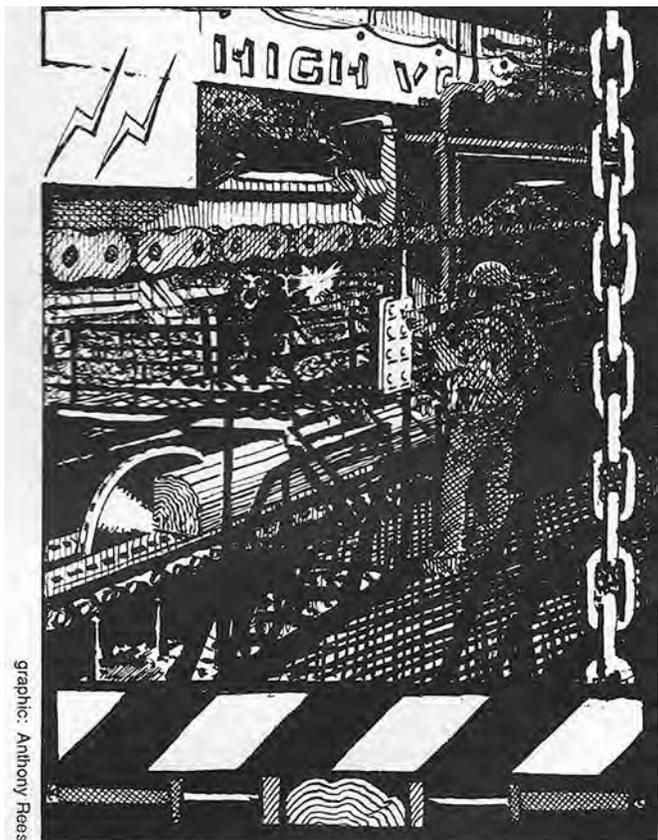
The mill at Fort Bragg was huge, with logs rolling into the south end of the site and stacked as lumber on the north end. In between, the whirling, grinding industrial mill could produce over a million board feet in 24 hours. Former mill worker Crawdad Nelson describes being "led through dank steel-and-grime interior" saying; we "stepped off the catwalk onto a series of steel plates, then, grabbing ropes which dangled from a forest of pipes and, rafter beams, hopped over steel tables and between band saws...There seemed to be no real floor, but only a series of levels and half-levels dropping to stinking darkness. It was loud...I was shaken to the core by the sudden intense blast of noise . . . Tall band saws screamed down 20-foot logs that bounced as they were kicked into play by hydraulic equipment strong enough to juggle trucks; cants whined through

edgers as easy as cheese. Gangs of saws dropped to trim out knots and weak spots from one or ten boards at a time. Everything slammed pounded and shrieked."

A huge grinder, known as the Hog, ground all the waste wood to fuel for an electrical generator at the center of this mechanical monster. If the Hog stopped, the whole mill stopped. The company avoided doing that, even during a horrifying toxic PCB spill in 1989 that endangered many people's lives.

According to mill workers on the scene "Head Millwright Frank Murray was checking the machinery when a capacitor burst, dumping 5-7 gallons of PCB-laden oil right in his face. The force of it caused him to swallow quite a bit of it. Fellow millwright Ron Atkinson found Frank with his skin and clothing soaked, gagging on the oil and temporarily blinded with the PCBs burning his skin and eyes. The capacitor was clearly marked with PCB warning labels, but the company insisted it was just mineral oil; so Frank's stomach was not pumped when he went to the hospital. He was merely washed off and returned to work the same night, still wearing the same PCB-soaked clothing. The capacitor continued to leak, spreading PCB-oil on the workroom floor and on the belt leading to the Hog, where it was burned and spewed over Fort Bragg in the form of dioxin."

At the same time, G-P was seriously over-cutting its industrial timberland. UC Forestry advisor Pete Passoff estimated they were overcutting their holdings by over 200%. The State of California in their Forest and Rangeland Resources Assessment Program (FRRAP) report predicted all of the lumber mills on the Mendocino Coast would be closed early in the new millennium. G-P sold its 194,000 acres of



graphic: Anthony Fleas

timberlands in 1999 and followed that up by closing their giant mill in Fort Bragg in 2002.

They did, however, keep the Hog running to make money generating electricity. They imported waste products for fuel and the Hog ground it up for the fire. People complained the burning made the Fort Bragg air stink. Air Quality regulators imposed a huge fine on G-P but never revealed what it was they were burning. Whatever it was, it generated a deadly form of dioxins that collected in their smoke stack and was then deposited in piles of fly ash around the mill site, or offered as a soil amendment up and down the Coast.

MILL SITE REUSE

When the G-P Mill closed in 2002, no one publicly talked about what to do next with the site or how to clean up the toxins. Early in 2003, a group of concerned citizens called North Coast Action started holding public gatherings at Town Hall to discuss the Mill Site's future.

There was a huge response. People jammed Town Hall. North Coast Action mainly wanted a thorough Mill Site characterization and clean up. They did not want toxic waste left in the middle of Fort Bragg endangering children and future generations.

They put an article in the Fort Bragg Advocate inviting former mill workers to share their knowledge of past toxic spills, dumps or cover ups on the 430-acre mill site. An alarmingly big response told them of toxic materials fed through the Hog and into the fire. They heard of PCB transformers dumped in the millpond. They were told of toxics buried late at night and covered with asphalt the next day. They consulted environmental experts to understand the ramifications of their findings. They hammered the Fort Bragg City Council

and G-P with their call for a thorough cleanup and the need to make the Department of Toxic Substances Control (DTSC) the lead agency in the cleanup.

Members of North Coast Action said Mayor Jere Melo expressed hostility toward their concerns about the Mill site. Melo had worked for the Union Lumber Company, Boise Cascade and Georgia Pacific from 1966 until the mill closed in 2002 and then went to work for the company that had bought all of G-P's timberland. He was the classic company man supporting the goals of the company in a town the company had always run and now forsaken. Georgia Pacific just wanted to sell the property for \$50 million and walk away from this non-performing asset. After months of public pressure, Georgia Pacific finally acknowledged that they were responsible for the clean up, but assured the public that spilled hydrocarbons were probably the only chemical of concern there. In 2004, they chose the North Coast Water Quality Control Board to be the lead agency in the cleanup and hired a consulting firm to begin the investigation.

Then, everything changed when Koch Brothers' Koch Industries bought the entire Georgia Pacific Corporation, and their polluted Fort Bragg Mill Site along with it, in early 2005. The City then hired environmental consultants and billed G-P for the cost.

In the first half of 2006, Water Quality inspectors found substantial dioxin contamination across the site, particularly in the piles of fly ash on the coastal bluffs. With this discovery, the North Coast Water Quality Control Board turned oversight of the clean-



up to DTSC, as North Coast Action had long advocated.

This instigated the City of Fort Bragg to invoke the Polanco Act, inserting the City into an oversight role in the clean up process. They wanted DTSC to continue overseeing the cleanup, but the City wanted to be at the table. Concerns arose, however, that “If the city’s partnership with Georgia-Pacific fell apart and it came down to who hired the best lawyers and lasted longest in court, it would be an uneven match.” A month later, DTSC relieved these concerns by ordering G-P to clean up their mill site in Fort Bragg, or face fines up to \$25,000 a day if they failed to comply with any portion of the 25-page order.

Since then, there have been too many ups and downs in the cleanup process to detail in this article. However, two of them, the massive lawsuit against the former owners of the Mill Site and the City in 2012, and then the wavering of DTSC about the comple-



tion of the Mill Site clean up stand out. G-P brought the lawsuit against the successor firm to Boise Cascade — Office Max — claiming that the toxins on the Mill Site predated G-P’s Mill Site purchase and that Office Max should pay them \$30 million for their share of the cleanup. In response Office Max, and then G-P, sued the City of Fort Bragg for \$30 million because they claimed the City’s storm water that drained into the millpond caused the worst pollution.

The Company, of course, had always controlled public policy of the City and had utilized the City’s storm drains for its own benefit. It was the biggest lawsuit the City had ever seen and required them to make over a million copies of past records. Then the case ended suddenly when G-P became concerned over something that came up in the discovery process, and signed agreements relieving the City of any responsibility for the cleanup and requiring Office Max to pay G-P \$15 million dollars toward the completion of the cleanup.

Remediation of the toxins on the Mill Site had to go hand in hand with planning for the future reuse of the Mill Site because levels of cleanup in particular areas is dependent on the future use of those areas. State standards required that residential areas be cleaned up to the highest degree and open space and parks cleaned up the least. That led most observers to advocate cleaning up the entire site to residential standards. Planning for the Mill Site reuse has also gone through more ups and downs than we can detail here. The most important factor, though, is to understand is that the planning process is still far from complete.

After NCA started their own public planning process in 2003, the City of Fort Bragg received a Coastal Conservancy grant, and hired a Berkeley planning firm and Marie Jones Consulting, to coordinate a public survey and small group gatherings to inform the Mill Site reuse process. Raised just outside Fort Bragg, economist Marie Jones helped develop the economic development portion of the report. That led to her becoming the Fort Bragg Community

Development Director and placed her, along with planning-professional, City Manager Linda Ruffing, as the of lead architects of the City's Mill Site reuse planning.

Georgia Pacific initially did not see themselves as developers and had little interest engaging in a planning process. They simply wanted to sell the property. Unfortunately, almost the entire 430-acres of the site was zoned Timber Resources Industrial (IT) which meant that the only allowable use for a future owner would be to build another lumber mill. G-P eventually realized that no one would buy the Mill Site property unless the zoning changed. The City felt the best approach was to create a specific plan for the entire site. The only way the City could ever go through that planning process was if Georgia Pacific paid for it.

This led to a G-P/City dance that moved all over the floor. Some people felt the City had been hired by G-P to create a reuse plan to G-P's specs and others thought that the arrangement forced G-P to fund a community planning process overseen by the City.

All of the City/G-P meetings were private. A Citizens Advisory Committee that could have been sitting at the table and would have made it a public process was never established. Although the City held many public-planning forums for the Mill Site reuse, it was never clear how G-P was responding to their outcome.

By 2012, the City and G-P did appear to have come up with a planning map for the future reuse of the Mill Site, and the Coastal Commission came to tour the Mill Site and comment on that plan. Unfortunately, two weeks before they arrived, G-P pulled out of the planning process and began its legal maneuvers around the clean up described earlier.

That put a halt to that planning

effort and left the City to concentrate on opening the Coastal Trail that now extends all along 92 acres of the City-owned ocean bluff top. For the first time in almost 150 years, locals and visitors alike have access to Fort Bragg's oceanfront. In 2017, as construction of the Coastal Trail neared completion, the City started grappling again with rezoning areas of the mill site for particular uses.

In the 17 years since the mill closed, there have been two significant developments on the Mill Site: the completion of the Coastal Trail and the beginnings of the Noyo Center for Marine Science. The City took the lead on developing the Noyo Center project and turned it over to a non-profit in 2014.

Since that time, the non-profit has erected a "Crows Nest" information center on their 11.5-acre Mill Site property, and established a Discovery Center at 338 North Main Street. By the end of 2019 they intend to have plans for a Noyo Marine Science Center campus with: lab space, a marine mammal trauma center, lodging for visiting scientists; an aquarium, tidal exhibits, and a 73-foot articulated blue whale skeleton. All buildings will be net-zero energy with a zero carbon footprint.

In September 2018, owners of the Skunk Train's parent company announced they had been negotiating with Georgia Pacific for a year and a



half to buy all of the Mill Site north of Redwood Avenue. Under this deal, two brothers, Chris and Mike Hart, would control the major portion of the Mill Site scheduled to have commercial and residential zoning. They are an interesting pair. Chris Hart runs a company converting waste into energy, but has also developed advanced weapons systems for the Army, Air Force, Navy and Marine Corps. They have big visions including: leasing land to North Coast Brewing Company; building a resort hotel; building a rail line out to the Coast; and building a new terminal at the north end of the Coastal Trail.

In December 2018, the Honer family, owners of Harvest Market, announced the completion of a deal of buy 15 acres of the Mill Site abutting Highway One, just north of the Cypress Street entrance. They are not saying what they will do with it. These deals set a precedent allowing G-P to sell more small-parcels without cleaning up the whole Mill Site.

The debate over the cleanup goes on. G-P has pushed DTSC to allow them to walk away from the cleanup by fencing off the most toxic sites or just covering them over. In May of 2018, DTSC approved G-P's plan claiming that bolstering the beach berm and the failing millpond dam would keep wildlife and the public safe from the toxins for years to come.

However, in February 2019 DTSC sent G-P a letter requesting further investigations of the toxics in the millpond and declaring that they were now including future climate change

and sea level rise as part of their evaluation of the sufficiency of the clean up. Both the beach berm and the mill pond dam are threatened by sea level rise, which means that fencing off the toxins and covering them up are not a viable approach to ensuring the long-term health of people or wildlife.

Historically, that wildlife got their water from Maple and Alder creeks that dove down to the sea in a wide swale and came together in a small estuarine marsh before draining across the beach into the ocean. Then the company diverted those creeks in buried pipes to fill their millpond.

Ever since G-P closed their Mill in 2002 people have dreamed about daylighting those creeks. In 2005, the Noyo Headlands Unified Design Group (NHUDG) made it a central part of their Noyo Headlands: Design Strategies for a Sustainable Future, which you can download at noyoheadlands.org.

In 2015, NHUDG issued a Road Map of how the process of daylighting the creeks might go, which is also available on their website. The Road Map clarifies how daylighting the creeks would "knit together ... the Central Business District –with the Coastal Trail... and include multi-use trails ... as well as interpretive signage describing the complete natural and cultural history of the lands through which they pass,. . . 'opening the door' to innovative development of the mill site."

At one point G-P's environmental and design firm, Arcadis, embraced daylighting the creeks as a way to mitigate the wetlands lost when the mill pond is drained and cleaned up of its toxins. The City includes it as one of the guiding principals of their current local Coastal Plan Amendment.



Now, the Fort Bragg Headlands Consortium, a “science-based group of organizations and individuals leveraging its technical expertise to promote informed and engaged communication within the community about the redevelopment of the Fort Bragg Headlands,” has taken up the effort to daylight the creeks. For more information on their efforts check out their website at fortbraggheadlandsconsortium.org.

The City is far from finalizing their LCP Amendment. They are now holding joint City Council/Planning Commission meetings monthly to discuss various aspects of the LCP Amendment. In 2017, when the City restarted its planning effort to rezone the Mill Site, they conducted a survey, which was completed by 954 people, 546 of which were city residents. They also held multiple workshops along with focus group gatherings with the Chamber of Commerce, Rotary and realtors.

In the survey, respondents strongly favored the map with the least development. Respondents also chose two out of six statements for their vision of Fort Bragg. Forty-seven percent of respondents favored the statement that Fort Bragg should be a sustainable community with open space and parks. Forty-four percent favored

the statement that Fort Bragg should be a working town with a diversified economy and good jobs. Among residents of Fort Bragg, those choices were reversed.

Participants in the focus groups were asked if the land use for the Mill Site should dedicate more land to open space, or to jobs and business, or to housing. By almost a two to one margin, open space was favored over the other two choices. Except for the Chamber of Commerce, Rotary and realtor groups, people chose open space almost 4 to one over housing and jobs. In 2009, the Coastal Commission, the final arbiter in this process, had told the City to include more open space in their plans. The same comments were also heard in 2012 and again in 2018 when the Coast Commission came to the North Coast.

The City’s next land use map did not reflect these results. Their map had much more development than the map chosen by a vast plurality of the survey respondents and included less open space contrary to the call for more open space in both



the survey and the focus groups. It also included the Hart's railroad route out along the coastal bluff. Finally, in their build-out analysis, the City included the urban reserve as open space, which seems a questionable categorization since urban reserve is only open space until it is not.

The City staff analysis of the survey and workshops also described a tension between open space and jobs. In fact there is no tension between the two. Open space restoration is a job creator on many levels. Multiple economic studies by the US Environmental Protection Agency, the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration, the Trust for Public Land and Ecotrust, along with many small-town anecdotal stories, confirm this reality. They all emphasize that for every million dollars spent on an open space restoration project, 20 to 30 good paying jobs are created. And those jobs have a multiplier effect through the entire local economy that creates an additional 25 to 35 more jobs. Ecotrust estimates that 80% of the money paid for open space jobs stays in the community and 90% stays in the region.

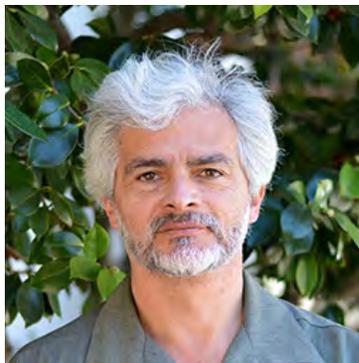
Bringing that back home, the \$12 million coastal trail project must have created 300 jobs and supported another 360 jobs. On top of that, the City of Fort Bragg estimates that 7,000 to 13,000 people use the coastal trail every day. If those people spend an average of 5 dollars in the local economy per trip, the trail itself generates \$50,000 a day into the local economy, and the multiplier effect of that spending is creating an additional \$40,000 a day of economic activity. The future economic benefits from daylighting Maple and Alder Creeks on the Mill Site could bring twice the economic benefits to the community that the trail has provided. More open space and restoration projects will bring more jobs not less.

Please join us at our forum at the Caspar Community Center on June 21 to continue this conversation. For more information on these events and to become involved please contact us: George Reinhardt george@mcn.org, Jim Tarbell rtp@mcn.org, Cal Winslow cwinslow@mcn.org, or Bill Lemos, blemos@mcn.org.

Public Forum on the Future of The Fort Bragg Mill Site

Caspar Community Center
Friday, June 21
7 PM

Presented by the Fort Bragg Mill
Site Symposium Committee
& Mendocino Institute,
www.mendocinoinstitute.org
Free Admission



With Ignacio Chapela,
UC Berkeley Professor
of Ecology speaking
on Science, Climate
Change, Sea Level Rise
and Resistance.