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South Bay Rising: An Interview with San Diego County Supervisor Greg Cox

OCTOBER 20, 2015 BY BARBARA ZARAGOZA — 1 COMMENT

By Barbara Zaragoza / Part One of Four

People are still buzzing with the news about Gross Domestic Product growth in the South Bay jumping by 37.6 % between 2010 to 2013. (That's compared to 12.9 % for the entire County.) Community members within the region, however, might start to feel uneasy. Nobody wants to see unchecked growth, skyrocketing housing prices, increased traffic congestion and no place to breathe in fresh air.

This week I focus on parks and recreation within the South Bay. It's not as sexy as, let's say, craft beer or the Charger's stadium. But parks and recreation touch upon issues of climate change, pollution, habitat preservation and neighborhood livability—to name only a few.

Turns out, the South Bay—within the next decade or so—will have some of the largest acreage dedicated to parks throughout San Diego. A primary reason is thanks to the efforts of the County government, which continues to buy land and dedicate space to habitat preservation as well as public recreation.



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The person most knowledgeable and most responsible for this development in the South Bay is San Diego County Board Supervisor Greg Cox. He took time out of his busy schedule to sit down with me and provide an extensive explanation of the South Bay's future in terms of land use.

For bicycle enthusiasts, hikers, border advocates and conservationists — the Supervisor gave us information about the future of our public spaces. I'll go over those in three upcoming articles, but first a little background information.

The SD County Board of Supervisors

A while back KPBS did a special explaining that the County is often an overlooked layer of government. Just in case you missed it: there are 5 County Board of Supervisors whose offices are located in downtown San Diego along Pacific Highway. In June 2015 they approved a \$5.4 million budget for the upcoming year. Their money goes to services such as public safety, health & human services and land use. (See the chart below.)

Supervisor Greg Cox, who has served in his role since 1995, was also a two-term Mayor for the City of Chula Vista. He represents District 1, which spans from Point Loma to the U.S.-Mexico border.

KPBS reported in June 2014 that Supervisor Greg Cox had given the county's *Department of Parks and Recreation* more than \$2.5 million, or about 10 % of his total spending budget.

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South Bay's Green Belt

Supervisor Cox is also very animated when speaking about public parks and recreation. He explains, "On a macro level, San Diego County is 4,200 square miles. We have a lot of territory and we are blessed in this county to have 11 watersheds that most people don't focus on, but... this is the life blood of the county. It's like having veins in your body and there's an opportunity to go in and really create some trail systems that will tie into some of the other North-South trails that we have."

For South Bay enthusiasts who know the pleasure of riding horses in the Sweetwater Valley or the Tijuana River Valley, who hike or fish along Otay Lakes County Park or bicyclists who enjoy the Bayshore Bikeway and the Otay Valley Regional Park, you might be surprised to find out that the County has been deeply involved in creating these parks ever since the 1970s, 80s and 90s.

The Supervisor sees the use of parks and recreation in the South Bay as continuing to increase. He says, "It's kind of interesting seeing just in the last couple of years the organizing that has come together. There's a couple of mountain biking clubs now. You go out on the Bayshore Bikeway on a weekend and you'll see people from Mexico that will come up, bring their bicycles and get on their bike path. You'll see organized clubs. You'll see mothers and dads with little kids."

Why the Emphasis on Parks & Recreation?

I asked Supervisor Cox why parks and outdoor recreation are so important to him. He explained, "South County, when you look at other areas of the San Diego region, probably has a lower per capita income. People can't afford to go out and stay in expensive campgrounds and RV parks and places like that. The more we can have affordable, or in most cases free, access to public resources, I think the County has an obligation to do that."

"To the extent that we can provide an environment for people to get out on a bicycle or hike a trail or to get out and just enjoy the fresh air, that's good. And if they can do it at a minimal cost or no cost, that's even better. And if they can do it with their families, that's the frosting on the cake."

The Supervisor also said that parks contribute to healthy lifestyles. "It's not just the fact of having parks and trails, it's to encourage healthy lifestyles. Forty percent of our budget goes to health and human service programs. We have a ten year campaign we initiated a little over five years ago now called *Live Well San Diego* and it's trying to get people to take more responsibility for their own health. The fact that you shouldn't smoke, you should exercise, you should eat more nutritious food and in doing that, you're going to avoid four chronic conditions that last year accounted for 57% of deaths in San Diego County, two-thirds of which could have been prevented if people paid more attention to those behaviors."

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Finally, while it might be premature to believe South Bay'ers would give up their cars, Supervisor Cox's larger vision does hope for a reduction of greenhouse gases. "Suddenly those [bike lanes] become arteries and these river parks become the veins that can really allow people to look for a viable alternative to driving their car every morning to NASSCO to work. Well, if you live in Chula Vista, it's going to be quicker and a lot healthier to get on the Bayshore Bikeway and ride your bike to NASCO and park your bike there. You save a lot of money. You'll have a healthier lifestyle and you'll get there quicker and get home quicker. That will cut down on greenhouse gases and you'll feel a lot better too."

Coming Up:

I wanted the Supervisor to answer all the pressing issues we have in the South Bay. In the next three days he'll tell us about:

- The vast growth expected in Otay Ranch (Chula Vista) and whether there will be open spaces;
- The Barrio to Barrio bikeway at the Port of Entry and an estimated time when the Bayshore Bikeway will be finished;
- The parkland right at the U.S.-Mexico border, it's history and how this will become some of the most unique parkland in Southern California.

*Also, a big thank you to Supervisor Cox's staff: **Luis Monteagudo** and **Michael De La Rosa** who provided additional valuable information, including maps.*

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