

CHAPTER III

COMMUNITY CHARACTER

GOALS:

The City of Brisbane...

and its Mountain

*will remain a place independent
and distinct,*

*with a small town quality and
a volunteer spirit,*

*where diversity is welcomed
and everyone can participate
in town meetings,*

*and elected officials carefully
consider the desires and needs of the
citizens, and*

*govern through circumscribed rules
and regulations, only as required
for the public health and safety and
the protection of the environment.*

COMMUNITY CHARACTER

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CHAPTER III

COMMUNITY CHARACTER

III.1 SAN BRUNO MOUNTAIN

"This is about Brisbane and its mountain. It stands more than a thousand feet high, this great outcropping of rock and scrub brush that surrounds the town like a pair of loving hands, isolating Brisbane from the busy metropolis grown up around, preserving here a time capsule of the way life was years ago - quiet, unhurried, comfortable in its familiarity with the land."

Walter Blum
California Living Magazine
April 6, 1975 ⁽¹⁾

Many factors contribute to the sense of security and well being of the members of a community, including family, shelter, food and safety. In Brisbane this sense of security and well being is also provided by San Bruno Mountain. There is a very personal feeling in Brisbane about the Mountain. As former Mayor Anja Miller said in 1975, "You're protected. In a way this is what makes us a community. We all look at each other in this bowl and there is a feel of neighborhood that you don't get in other towns." ⁽²⁾ This chapter attempts to capture the importance of how the Mountain looks and feels to Brisbane and how we can be good stewards for it.

San Bruno Mountain rises above the San Francisco Bay and dominates the landscape of northern San Mateo County. Despite all the development in its valleys and on its slopes, it retains the character of what it may have looked like to the Costanoan Indians and Spanish explorers. The brushlands and grasslands still mix with the chaparral, oak and coastal sage growing in their native habitat. On the sheltered eastern side of the Mountain, Owl and Buckeye Canyons face northerly and contain the largest woodland communities. The Mountain is habitat for many small animals, including meadow mice, ground squirrels, moles, raccoons, rabbits, opossums, and even foxes. (See Chapter IX, Conservation.)

The significance of San Bruno Mountain lies in its roles as a natural protector from the elements, a habitat for protected and endangered species, a course for carrying storm waters, a centerpiece of local identity and history, a resource for recreational activities, a definer of geographical identity within its bowl, and an enduring source of visual beauty.

The residents of Brisbane view the Mountain as their totem, keeping the fog from their houses and protecting their safety by limiting access to its boundaries.

The steep slopes of the Mountain rise to form a boundary between Brisbane and the surrounding cities of South San Francisco on the south, Daly City on the west, and San Francisco on the north. The San Francisco Bay wraps around Brisbane to the east. The majority of the City's residents live in a "bowl" nestled into Mountain. The borders of the Mountain and the Bay give the residents a sense of geographic insulation and respite from the surrounding urban areas. This feeling of isolation is enhanced by the Peninsula as a whole, with water on three sides and the Santa Cruz Mountains to the south.

As an ecological island, San Bruno Mountain is home to many species of plant, animal and insect life, which are unique to the Mountain. Best known of these are the Mission blue and callippe silverspot butterflies, which are listed on the Federal endangered and candidate species lists. Some 2,300 acres of the Mountain have been protected by the creation of the San Bruno Mountain State and County Park. The City Council and many citizens in Brisbane, especially Mimi Whitney and the Committee to Save San Bruno Mountain, worked very hard to preserve the Mountain in open space. The "Saddle in Open Space Amendment," which was ultimately approved by the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors in 1976, called for the Saddle to be preserved as a part of a regional park and allowed development of the South Slope in South San Francisco, the Western Ridges in Daly City and the Northeast Ridge in Brisbane. In 1989, Buckeye Canyon, the only pristine northerly-facing canyon, and the adjacent Owl Canyon, were purchased as an ecological reserve by the Wildlife Conservation Board using State Proposition 70 bond funds. Local citizens, conservation groups and the City government actively lobbied for its purchase.

The policies set forth in the General Plan envision the City continuing to take an activist and leading role in maintaining the beauty, wildlife and habitat of the Mountain and teaching others of its importance as a resource.

III.2 VOLUNTEER COMMUNITY SERVICE AND CITY GOVERNMENT

"It seemed to me that the people who came here were very poor, but they had this spirit of independence. They'd get these old boards or old tar paper, whatever, and put up these old shacks, you might say. But still it was your shack. It was your old tar paper. It was your old boards."

Dorothy Radoff
City Historian
A Spirit of Independence ⁽³⁾

This section is concerned with the history of Brisbane, how the community sees and expresses itself and wishes to be governed. It is an attempt to translate the intangible sense of history, environment, well being and independent spirit into the tangible policies and programs needed to keep Brisbane a fine place to live, to work, and to raise a family.

The Costanoan Indians, the first habitants on San Bruno Mountain, found an idyllic life. The Mountain with its animals and vegetation, and the marshlands and San Francisco Bay with their shellfish provided abundantly. There are some remains of the Indians, including shell mounds in the canyons and ravines, but after the Spanish conquistadors and Mexican rule, the lands of San Bruno Mountain were given in a land grant to others. These lands passed through many hands including renowned Charles Crocker, who purchased the bulk of the Mountain - a little over 3,000 acres - for \$4,000 in 1884. It was these lands that welcomed Brisbane's pioneers.

Brisbane's character has been especially influenced by the early pioneers who came in 1908 after the San Francisco earthquake, and in 1929 through 1933 during the Great Depression. The town grew from the 28 residents during the 1920s, adding 400 families between 1929 and 1933. Brisbane's founders were working men and women who, despite the hard times, were committed to improving the quality of life in Brisbane. The families who lived in Brisbane during these times helped establish the community character by creating the Brisbane Volunteer Fire Department in 1932, the Brisbane Improvement Club in 1930, the Girl and Boy Scouts Club in 1932 and the Community Baptist Church and Catholic Church in 1937. The new Brisbane Elementary School was built in 1939, with its four rooms, auditorium, and four teachers.

The early settlers focused on improving the quality of life, educating their children and keeping the town safe. The organizations they formed were based on the volunteer efforts of the townspeople. They got together and helped a war veteran move out of a mud hut into a house, and they drew up plans and built the first firehouse. They shared food and clothing, each person knowing that he or she might be the one in need of the aid the next time. Brisbane's founders organized the community and built the projects, tasks which would normally fall to a city government. Some of the families who came in 1908 and their descendants were named Allemand and Mozzetti; others who came in the late 1920s and early 1930s were named Walch, Schmidt, Gomez, Williams and Schwenderlauf. Their sense of independence and spirit of helping hands are not just history, but are alive in the third and fourth generations of these founding families, many of whom are still here today.

The activities of local clubs and organizations in Brisbane reflect the volunteer spirit of the community, which is the pride and cornerstone of this City. The commitment to giving a helping hand, providing a community service or raising funds for those in need is evident in the local services clubs, organizations and churches. These groups are currently very active and productive, and provide a window to the community's character.

The Lions Club and Federated Women's Club are in the forefront of providing direct service to the community. The Brisbane Federated Women's Club has given generously in such projects as the Senior Alert Computer, the Fire Hydrant Painting Project and in sponsorship of annual community events like the Senior Citizen Holiday Brunch. The Lions hold barbecues and sponsor annual fund drives, and assist other clubs with their own fund raisers. The Lions also

provide eye glasses and Christmas gifts for needy residents, meals for the homebound and funds for student scholarships, sponsor health fairs and provide support to Brisbane youth organizations. Traditional holiday events, including a pumpkin patch, egg hunt, Santa's Visit, and holiday tree sales, are sponsored by the Lions. The Eagles Club focuses its fundraising efforts on behalf of the Leukemia and American Heart Associations, as well as the needs of the local cub scouting program.

The Parents' Club, Brisbane Dance Workshop, Boy Scout Troop, and Brisbane Educational Support Team provide assistance to the schools and school age children. These groups provide programs, funding and adult leadership to the community's youth. In providing for the entire range of services for elder residents, the Seniors' Club has a weekly social gathering, as well as educational and travel opportunities.

The Friends of the Brisbane Library stage story telling, magic and puppet shows for children of all ages and assist in all aspects of the library operations, as well as provide assistance with the City's historical archives. In addition, the Friends of the Library host an annual Brisbane History Night.

The annual scholarship fund for college students and the making of the Christmas stars show the wide interest and community effort of the local Chamber of Commerce. The Brisbane Yacht Club sponsors a youth sailing program and an annual Marina event with a boating competition. Families have joined together to help each other through the Brisbane Baby Sitting Coop to provide emotional support and childcare for its members.

The Brisbane Community Association, Brisbane Beautification Committee, and Brisbane Garden Club are devoted to enhancing and complementing the physical beauty of the City. An annual flower show, community clean-ups and maintenance of community landscaping are focal points of these volunteers.

The Community Emergency Volunteers are a trained and ready volunteer force for any community need. Arising out of the 1989 earthquake, citizens began training and organizing for community preparedness.

The local churches are regularly attended, reflecting the faith and spiritual values of many of the members of the community and, in an effort to assist neighbors in solving community problems, many citizens volunteer as community mediators.

The founders considered the idea of an independent city government starting back in the 1930s. It was always a touchy subject. Up until the time of incorporation in 1961, there had been only special purpose government districts for sewer, water or fire. Early efforts failed for a variety of reasons: differences regarding the extent of the boundaries, perceived higher taxes and costs, disputes with adjacent property owners such as the Crocker Land Company or the Southern Pacific Railroad, and perhaps because, as founder

Fred Schmidt stated, "They didn't want the mayor or somebody else telling them what the heck to do."⁽⁴⁾ One of the major reasons for the eventual incorporation was a potential move on the part of the County of San Mateo to make Brisbane an Urban Renewal project and bulldoze many of the existing houses.

Joining together to fight outsiders has been the bedrock of much of Brisbane political tradition. The local government has had to struggle with San Francisco's landfill operation, plans for filling San Francisco Bay, the proposed resource incinerator center, the habitat conservation plan and development proposals for all of San Bruno Mountain, the annexation of the Quarry, Crocker Park and the Northeast Ridge. These were not small town issues. They tested the newly formed government and engendered volatile disputes among the voters. Many of these issues lead to recalls, ballot initiatives and lawsuits. The one recurring theme in all the disputes was self-determination. While some citizens saw opportunities to secure financial independence for the City government and others saw outsiders as jeopardizing a small town way of life and its environment, whichever side was taken, the Brisbane way was to stand up for yourself and your rights. This strong sense of self-determination set the tone and foundation for Brisbane's City government. Given the origins and history of the City's incorporation, the citizens saw the main function of government as protecting them from outsiders and ensuring that outside proposals and plans would enhance and not degrade the quality of life in Brisbane.

On the other hand, Brisbane citizens have not embraced the City's rules or regulations regarding their conduct or accepted City projects without their input and support. Local government has been viewed as a bottom up proposition, with Council meetings akin to the old town hall meetings that were common when the nation was first founded. The City's capital improvement projects have been subject to heated debates, citizen committees, surveys and votes. The City's regulations regarding minimum lot size and setbacks, and even the need for a police department, have been part of the public dialogue. Brisbane's citizens have always looked to the City government to justify what it is doing and to get the citizens' permission. The spirit that has motivated Brisbane citizens to battle with outside interests spills over into battles with the City government. As Dorothy Radoff said, what's "even more remarkable, Brisbane's history reveals that you can actually fight city hall--and win!!"⁽⁵⁾ Brisbane's tradition of direct input and involvement has lead to a participatory rather than representative form of local politics and to a laissez faire rather than regulatory form of local governmental controls.

Policy 4 Acknowledge the fundamental rights of citizens to freely act and to use their own property, except to the extent government rules or regulations are necessary for the public health and safety and for protection of the environment.

Policy 5 Use the least intrusive rules and regulations consistent with overall governmental needs and State and Federal law.

Policy 6 Set clear and definitive standards for all rules and regulations.

Brisbane's tradition of participation in community affairs serves several important functions, including identifying community values, informing the public, providing the opportunity for public comments and evaluations, and creating an atmosphere in which conflicting opinions and demands can be resolved. The City often makes special efforts to obtain citizen involvement in planning and evaluating issues of concern to the community. The extensive uses of the public bulletin board, direct mass mailings, special meetings, workshops and telephone and personal surveys have been the approaches and techniques used to ensure public involvement. In addition, the City Council makes appointments of citizens to its Planning Commission and Parks, Beaches and Recreation Commission, which act to resolve certain issues and advise on others. Wider participation in City government informs and improves public policy development and lends strength and legitimacy to City goals.

Policy 6.1 **Assist and facilitate the local service groups in their volunteer efforts on behalf of the community.**

Policy 7 **Continue to provide opportunities for citizen participation as part of the City's decision-making process.**

Program 7a: Actively disseminate information to the public through the public bulletin board, the Brisbane Star, press releases, water bills, postings in public buildings and public mailings.

Program 7b: Hold periodic community, neighborhood and business meetings to solicit input and provide information regarding emergency services.

Program 7c: Use water bills and the Brisbane Star to solicit public opinion and provide mechanisms for public response.

Policy 7.1 **Acknowledge the socially enriching value of various ages, ethnicities, economic groups and occupations within the community.**

FOOTNOTES

1. Walter Blum, "Shadow on the Mountain," *California Living Magazine* (April 6, 1975).
2. Waiter Blum, "Shadow on the Mountain," *California Living Magazine* (April 6, 1975).
3. H1-1, p.9.
4. H1-1, p.45
5. H1-2, p.154