

THE VIEW FROM NOYO BRIDGE

VINCE TAYLOR

HAD YOU NOTICED THAT SOLID concrete barriers, rather than railings, have become the norm for new bridges in California? Installed by the California Department of Transportation (Caltrans) in the name of motorist safety as older bridges are replaced, these ugly barriers have been taking away our views of streams, rivers, bays, and the ocean.

You won't see such a barrier on the new bridge across the Noyo River in Fort Bragg, Mendocino County, however. Local citizens wouldn't have it. After a lengthy battle, Caltrans approved a new railing that meets current safety standards, is aesthetically pleasing, and provides excellent visibility.

Getting Caltrans to change course was extremely difficult. Nonetheless, in the end the public won and set a precedent that can help prevent further blocking of scenic views in the name of highway safety.

I hope my story of the struggle over the Highway 1 Noyo River Bridge will encourage more people to defend coastal community values against attempts to build large projects that disregard those values. It shows that even a single citizen is not powerless.

What Caltrans Proposed

IN THE SUMMER OF 1998, Caltrans released plans to replace the two-lane steel girder bridge that crossed the Noyo River from the tops of the 110-foot-high bluffs above the Noyo Harbor

entrance, at the southern end of Fort Bragg. This bridge, built in 1948 on Highway 1, had been identified as unsafe during a seismic safety review of highway bridges after the 1989 Loma Prieta earthquake. It was also a bottleneck for traffic. The agency proposed a concrete box-girder bridge, which is a typical freeway bridge. Although described as a "four-lane bridge," it was 87 feet wide—wider than the Golden Gate Bridge. It would almost completely fill its right of way and come within 10 feet of a restaurant and motel on its seaward side.

The narrow old bridge, with its open railings, had provided spectacular views of Noyo Harbor, the harbor entrance, and adjacent coastal bluffs. The proposed new bridge was to have a solid concrete barrier that would cut off most of these views.

The bridge design outraged local citizens, many of whom were already irate that a large and controversial hotel under construction near the north end of the bridge was blocking some of the same views. The citizens who objected wanted Caltrans to come up with an architecturally more distinctive design, a narrower bridge, and railings that preserved the view. Others in the community, however, wanted a new four-lane bridge and the economic benefits of the \$20 million project, never mind the views and aesthetics.

The ensuing battle over the bridge and railing design went on for two and a half years. It involved Caltrans, the Fort Bragg Planning Commission and City Council, the Coastal Commis-

sion, the California Transportation Commission, and numerous citizens of Mendocino County. (An extensive chronology with linked documentation is at www.bridgerailings.org.)

Education of a Novice

WHEN THE BRIDGE PROJECT came to public attention, I was living in Caspar, a small village just south of Fort Bragg. I had recently retired from running a software business and wanted to help out in my community. When I learned about the scale and design of the proposed bridge, I studied the plans and then wrote a letter to Caltrans suggesting how to build a better bridge. I also sent a letter to the editor of the local newspaper. I never imagined that these small actions would lead me into an extended battle with the largest public agency in California.

I had some useful background and experience, having studied science and economics, and had spent many years analyzing the economics of public issues. But I was naïve about the ways of government bureaucracies and agencies. The Noyo Bridge taught me a lot.

A big early lesson had to do with the receptiveness of Caltrans to public suggestions. When I wrote to the project manager, Karen Tatman, suggesting changes that would narrow the bridge and improve the views, I actually believed that Caltrans would welcome and incorporate my suggestions. Now I understand that when Caltrans puts a project out to obtain the necessary permits from other agencies, internal approval has already been given at all levels. Changing anything is a major bureaucratic headache, and Caltrans is unlikely to change plans except in response to massive public opposition or the threat of rejection by one of the permitting bodies. Not knowing this, I was surprised and dismayed when Ms. Tatman ignored my suggestions and, in her response to me and to my letter to the editor, defended the Caltrans design.

Caltrans needed permits from both the City of Fort Bragg and the Coastal Commission. The proposal was brought before the Fort Bragg Planning Commission at a hearing on December 30, 1998. By this time Caltrans had responded to public outcry by making some cosmetic changes to the understructure and proposing a new, supposedly “see-through” railing (see photo p. 32).

This I called a “see-little” railing because to me it looked more like a tank trap.

I did a thorough analysis, with simulated photos showing the loss of views, and took this to the Fort Bragg Planning Commission. When it rejected the permit application by a vote of four to one, I was elated, thinking that now Caltrans would need to go back to the drawing board. Alas, I was still a babe in the woods.

I soon learned that the City Council could overrule the Planning Commission. Two weeks prior to the Council meeting, Caltrans District Director Rick Knapp wrote to Fort Bragg’s mayor, saying that if the city didn’t approve the project, Caltrans might have to retrofit the existing bridge and then “you cannot expect the bridge to be replaced or improved for the next 20 years.” A well-coordinated campaign, including a petition drive for acceptance of the design, was mounted.

On January 26, 1999, at a City Council meeting packed with Caltrans supporters, Director Knapp stressed that any delays could cause loss of funding for the bridge. The petition, bearing 1,000 signatures, was presented. Some former protesters recanted. I was one of only a few people willing to stand up and object. I argued that there was essentially no risk of cancellation because this was a seismic safety project, and that denying the permit would force Caltrans to negotiate a better bridge. The antagonism toward me was palpable. The City Council unanimously approved the permit.

All was not yet lost. Caltrans still needed permit approvals from several state and federal agencies, including the California Coastal Commission, which is mandated by the California Coastal Act of 1976 to protect coastal resources,

Old Noyo Bridge. In the background, the new bridge is under construction.



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Top and opposite: Views from the new Noyo Bridge

Below: Vince Taylor victorious



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including ocean views from Highway 1 and the special character of coastal communities. With my encouragement, Roanne Withers, a veteran community activist, appealed to the Commission on behalf of the Fort Bragg chapter of the Sierra Club.

Lessons at the Coastal Commission

THE COASTAL COMMISSION heard the appeal on March 12, 1999, in Monterey. Only a few people from the Fort Bragg area, other than city officials, made the five-hour drive.

I went to the meeting uninformed about procedures and learned, to my dismay, that only Caltrans and the Sierra Club would be allowed more than three minutes to speak. In a permit appeal, you have to be one of the appellants to get more time.

Later I would come to understand that if you want to be heard, it is crucially important to provide documentation to the commissioners before the meeting. Make sure it is clear and has a good and concise summary, because commissioners are literally inundated with thousands of pages of information before each monthly meeting.

I was also to learn the importance of working with Commission staff ahead of time. Because of their overwhelming workload, commissioners rely heavily on their staff's analyses and recommendations. Staff are often receptive, friendly, and helpful. You may be able to educate them, and they may be able to draw on your materials

and conclusions in their staff report. You can also learn from them about rules and procedures that will help you be more effective as a citizen advocate. Fortunately for me, at the meeting in Monterey Mark Massara, director of the Sierra Club's coastal programs, gave me 10 of his 15 minutes, giving me a chance to show my slides and make my points about the loss of views and better alternatives in some detail.

Speaking for Caltrans, District Director Knapp emphasized that the Noyo Bridge "is a critically important seismic safety project." It is a vital section of Highway 1, and if the commissioners failed to approve the project, Knapp argued, they would be putting everyone from Fort Bragg north in danger of being cut off in the event of an earthquake. He maintained that the only available railing that met mandatory federal crash-test standards was the one Caltrans was proposing, that qualifying any new railing would take years, and that if the Commission failed to grant a permit that day, without changes, the bridge could not be started that year.

As the state's key authority on highway safety, Caltrans has almost unquestionable power when it speaks on this issue. So as a citizen advocate arguing for an alternative, you need to be prepared to demonstrate convincingly that your alternative is equally safe. I was not prepared for that.

Based on Caltrans' assertion that no design modifications or delays were acceptable, the Commission staff recommended a \$2 million mitigation fee to compensate at least in part for the proposed design's destruction of coastal



BRUCE MOORE

assets. During the hearing, this was reduced to \$1 million and included as a condition of the permit.

The Commission approved the permit 5 to 4. It also requested that Caltrans begin showing the Commission alternative designs for future bridges—a request that was to prove highly important in the story of the Noyo Bridge.

Don't Give Up

ALTHOUGH IT SEEMED THAT the Noyo Bridge was a lost cause, I could not accept that better, equally safe railing designs were not available. I started searching, made many phone calls, and eventually found my way within the Federal Highway Administration (FHWA) in Washington, D.C., to the person who keeps track of all federally approved bridge railings. Lo and behold, a number of more visually transparent railings had passed federal crash tests. One in particular, a railing designed and used for many years in Wyoming, seemed especially suitable for the Noyo Bridge. I now knew that Caltrans was wrong when it asserted no scenic railings other than the “see-little” rail had passed federal crash tests.

The lesson here is that many people are willing to help if you ask them—I even found people in Caltrans who were forthright and helpful—and that many sources of useful information exist. Today the Internet is the place to begin looking, not just for information but also to locate and contact knowledgeable people. Don't be afraid to call people and ask them for information and leads.

I tried to get Caltrans to consider the Wyoming rail for the Noyo Bridge, without success. The existence of other federally approved railings directly contradicted emphatic statements made by Caltrans before the Coastal Commission. I looked at the Coastal Act and decided that these and other erroneous statements were grounds for revoking the permit.

On May 31, 1999, I submitted my findings to Coastal Commission staff and requested that the Noyo Bridge permit be revoked. On June 4, Peter Douglas, the Commission's executive director, accepted my request for a revocation hearing. His action would have suspended construction activities on the bridge until the Commission heard the revocation request. The suspension of construction was, however, irrelevant because—after insisting on the absolute necessity of starting the project that year, on April 16—Caltrans

had announced that construction would not begin until 2000.

To revoke the permit, the Coastal Commission would need to find that Caltrans had deliberately deceived or withheld information. This was a tall hurdle, and my evidence wasn't sufficient to surmount it. At the revocation hearing held July 15, Caltrans acknowledged that it knew of the existence of the Wyoming rail at the time of the earlier permit hearing, but said that it had not considered it for the Noyo Bridge because it “was not consistent with the Department's policy regarding the use [of only] concrete barrier rails.” So now the determining factor was not safety, but Department policy. Yet only one commissioner voted for revocation.

At this hearing Caltrans introduced an entirely new condition for an acceptable railing: it must

Other Bridges, Other Views

VINCE TAYLOR'S SUCCESSFUL battle for a “see-through” railing on the Noyo Bridge called public attention to bridge railing design throughout the coast. “Certainly since Noyo we have carefully looked at every bridge,” said Tami Grove, statewide development and transportation liaison for the Coastal Commission. A working group known as the Road's Edge subcommittee now brings together representatives of Caltrans, the Commission, and some other agencies to consider a variety of potential design concepts for

railings and barriers on bridges, roadsides, and median strips. What works on an urban freeway may not be appropriate for a rural stretch of Highway 1, and what looks good on a road running past sand dunes may not be the same as what fits along a road through a redwood forest. Right now, for instance, steel-backed timber is being tested as a possibility for Big Sur, Grove said. “Early next year we should have a pretty expansive palette. We will also look to insure that the Coastal Trail is incorporated into the design.”



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A Few Words from Caltrans

ASOLID CONCRETE BARRIER is the safest barrier to date,” said Sheila Mone, supervising environmental planner in the Division of Environmental Analysis. It is also “easy to construct, economical, and has good maintenance characteristics,” added Roberto Lacalle, office chief, Office of Design and Technical Services. Such barriers were indeed the norm for over 30 years, he said. On some scenic and historic bridges, such as the Bixby Bridge in Big Sur, according to Mone, “we spent a lot of time and money to retrofit rather than replace.”

The use of concrete on the Noyo Bridge had probably been a “department preference” rather than “department policy,” according to Lacalle, because “we were considering steel rails in that time period.”

Among railings reviewed was the Wyoming rail, but the federal crash test results fell short of California’s standards, which are not the same as the federal ones. Regarding the delays, Caltrans staff pointed out that construction projects proceed on a seasonal schedule, so if a setback occurs, a project may have to be postponed for a whole year.

As to Vince Taylor, Lacalle said: “He’s been passionate about the rails and it’s had us look at more options.” Mone added: “The Department of Transportation went back to the drawing boards, looked at other designs used in other places, considered crash tests, and adopted some new designs into our palette.”

—RG

Above: Caltrans’ first response to citizen complaints was this “see-through” railing.

be made of concrete. Meeting federal safety standards, which Caltrans had previously emphatically asserted was the requirement, no longer sufficed. This was not the last time Caltrans changed its requirements after I showed that its previous requirements could be met by the Wyoming rail.

The Next Blow

AT THIS POINT, WHILE I HAD made some connections with Coastal Commission staff, I had not developed relations with any commissioners. I understand now that if you are involved in an ongoing Commission matter, you must try to find one or more commissioners who are favorably disposed toward your view and cultivate a relationship. That way you can

often get their e-mail addresses and send them copies of material directly (but always include copies to the Commission staff). Some commissioners will also talk with you on the phone. If you go to a Commission meeting, you will hear, before an item is discussed, a request that commissioners report any “ex parte” communications about that item. You will find that developers and other powerful interests routinely talk with individual commissioners ahead of time.

It was, I believe, because I lacked good connections with commissioners that Caltrans was subsequently able to give a workshop for the commissioners on alternative railings without my being invited. In October, when I learned that the workshop, to be held in December, would be closed to the public, I wrote to the Commission to protest and offer to make a supplemental presentation—to no avail. My error may have been in writing to the Commission in general, rather than contacting individual commissioners or staff. I learned later in talking to a staff person that letters addressed just to the Commission and not related to a permit application almost never rise to the level of commissioner awareness. If you want some action, be sure that your requests get to the people who can fulfill them.

One outcome of the Caltrans workshop was the creation of a bridge railing subcommittee, consisting of commissioners Chris Desser and Shirley Detloff. Specific commissioners now had a responsibility in this area, and Chris Desser had been a critic of Caltrans’s Noyo design from the beginning.

I asked the Commission staff for a copy of Caltrans’s presentation. When I received it, my worst fears were realized: Caltrans had taken the federally approved railing designs of other states and modified them. All were ugly and visually opaque. In all, a traffic barrier, 42” pedestrian railing, and 54” bicycle railing had been combined into one. Caltrans had ignored the possibility of a two-rail system (which I had recommended from the outset) that places the traffic barrier on the inside of the sidewalk and a pedestrian railing on the outside. It had introduced a new set of engineering “safety requirements” that caused all of the federally approved railings to be modified to have much thicker rails. The “modified Wyoming rail” bore no resemblance to the original. Once again Caltrans had shifted the ground for design. First, it said the railings needed to meet federal crash tests.

Then it said the railings needed to be concrete to meet department policy. Now it was willing to show the Coastal Commission steel railings, but asserted that these needed to meet a different set of safety standards, and that these different standards required the modifications presented.

By now I was very skeptical of Caltrans's claim that there were legitimate safety reasons for the ugly railings. I called my contact at the Federal Highway Administration and asked him about these "AASHTO LRFD [load factor resistance design] Standards." He told me that they were from an old document and sent me a copy of the relevant pages. When I looked at the document, I found that: first, it had been superseded; second, it was only a guide for designing railings that will pass crash tests; and third, it showed that the unmodified Wyoming rail met the standards contained therein. The lesson here is to get the original source documents cited by Caltrans. You don't need to be an engineer to review them. You will be surprised at how often the source documents don't support Caltrans's claims.

I realized that my nonprofessional word would carry no weight with Caltrans. I needed to enlist someone they would listen to. On April 6, 2000, I contacted the Wyoming Department of Transportation, and Greg Frederick of their engineering department verbally confirmed that the Wyoming rail was designed to meet the standards cited by Caltrans. I requested that he send a written confirmation of this to the Coastal Commission. The same day, I wrote to Steve Scholl, a deputy director of the Coastal Commission, and to Caltrans, reporting my conversation with Mr. Frederick.

Unfortunately, it would take five months and a request from the chair of the Coastal Commission to get written confirmation from Wyoming.

The Turning Point

THROUGH THE FIRST HALF OF 2000, I seemed to be making no progress. Then came the break. In July 2000, Caltrans announced the second delay in construction of the Noyo Bridge. It would not start before June 2001. This was two years later than the start date that Caltrans had told the Coastal Commission was essential for public safety, thereby persuading a reluctant Commission to approve the permit.

This announcement came just before the Commission's July 2000 meeting. With the help of the Sierra Club's Roanne Withers, who had filed the initial appeal, we briefed Commission

A Public Servant Says: Listen to the Public

THE MORAL FOR THE PUBLIC in Vince Taylor's tale of the Noyo Bridge railing is clear: Don't give up. The moral for public servants is equally clear: Open up and listen—your colleagues, consultants, and other public officials don't necessarily have all the answers. We often get the best results when we are creative and "think outside of the box." Listening and giving real consideration to ideas from the public can be a powerful ticket out of that box.

I was the Coastal Commission staff member assigned to the original appeal of Caltrans' Noyo Bridge design, and it initially appeared to me that the project's momentum might be unstoppable. But the questions being asked by Vince Taylor, City Council Member Dan Gjerde, and other local citizens made sense. Was a bridge deck as wide as the Golden Gate's really necessary for the traffic load? How would such a massive structure affect the precarious economy of Noyo Harbor, just below it? Why were more elegant and view-preserving railings, similar to the ones I passed while crossing the Richardson Bay Bridge every day, not possible? (One of the more delightful aspects of the old bridge was its use as a "chicken view," where fishermen and boaters driving over could see the waves at the mouth of the harbor before deciding whether to go out.)

While the Commission's staff recommendation and subsequent action did not require a new bridge railing, it did require Caltrans to pay \$1 million to mitigate the loss of bridge views. Eventually these funds were used to help the city of Fort Bragg purchase 20 acres at the Noyo Headlands and create Pomo Bluffs Park.

The Commission ruling also prompted Caltrans to develop more appropriate railing designs for future bridges. And, in the best tribute to the tenacity of a caring public, Caltrans was finally brought around: the new Noyo Bridge has railings that still show off the beauty of the river, the harbor, and the sea.

We're a long way from the direct democracy of a small town-meeting in New England, but it's still up to individuals to "form a more perfect union." In more than 30 years of public service in planning and environmental agencies, time and again I've found that some of the best ideas and insights come to us—free of charge—from people who are committed to their ideals, do their homework, and speak their minds. Every public servant should keep this close to heart.

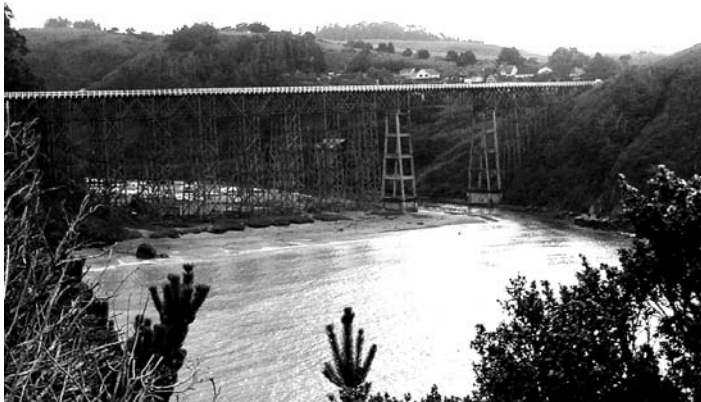
—Jack Liebster

staff on the delay so that they would be prepared to inform the commissioners. I prepared a one-page list of actions the Commission might take to pressure Caltrans to provide a visually transparent railing and, before the meeting, presented it to Commission chair Sara Wan and railing subcommittee members.

At the meeting commissioners expressed dismay at the delay, after Caltrans had used the urgency argument to shut off Commission consideration of alternatives that could better preserve the scenic values of the Noyo River and harbor.

After the staff briefing on the delay, I gave the Commission a necessarily brief update on my findings with respect to the Wyoming Rail and explained the list of possible Commission actions. Among these were a request that the Commission write to the Wyoming Depart-

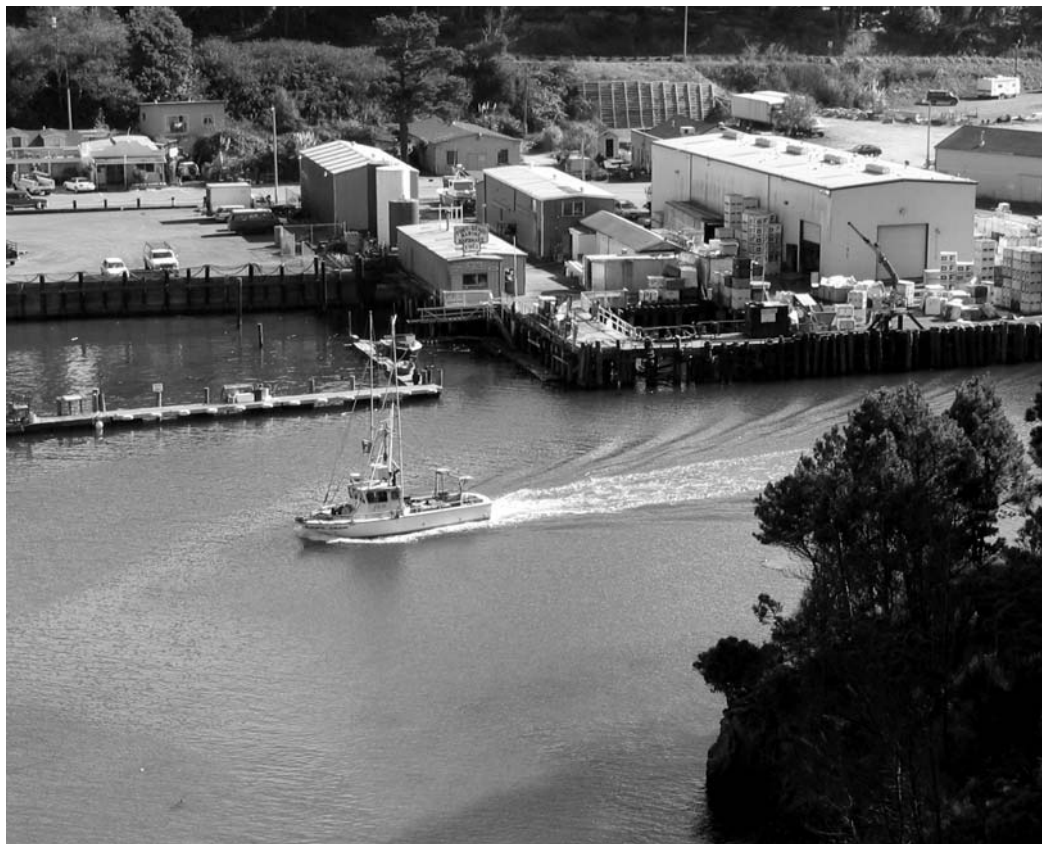
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Above and above right: The Albion River Bridge is the oldest working timber-frame bridge in California. Constructed of old-growth redwood, it is still sound.

Right: View of Noyo Harbor from the new bridge.



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ment of Transportation and ask it to confirm that its railing met engineering standards and to Caltrans asking it to use one of the newly approved, metal scenic railings on the Noyo Bridge if it could be fit into the bridge's construction schedule.

The Commission was extremely receptive to my requests and directed staff to follow through on these and the others. This meeting was the turning point in the struggle for an acceptable railing, and I went from being con-

sidered an outsider to being treated as a respected, desirable source of independent information. The Commission was now taking my input seriously.

I spent another nine months of frustrating, sometimes enraging, confrontations with Caltrans engineers. Finally, on March 6, 2001, I wrote to Caltrans Director Jeff Morales, asking him to conduct a review of his engineering department's continuing refusal to accept the Wyoming rail.

A Happy Ending

WHETHER OR NOT MY LETTER had any effect I will never know for certain, because Caltrans's response on April 10, 2001, rebutted some contentions in my letter and did not directly address acceptance of the Wyoming rail. Coincidentally or not, however, on exactly this same date, Rick Land, Caltrans's bridge design supervisor, wrote to inform the Commission that the agency was approving a newly designed steel rail, the ST-10. The ST-10 was a sufficiently close cousin to the Wyoming rail to provide the Commission with a fully acceptable scenic railing. It took yet another construction delay to ensure that this railing was used on the new Noyo Bridge in the two-rail system I'd been proposing since 1998, but the wheels that led to this outcome were set in motion at the July 2000 Commission meeting.

The positive outcome grew out of a confluence of events, ongoing efforts, and preparation. The key factor was the major delay in construction of the Noyo Bridge, which provided an opening to gather information and present it to the Commission. Also, by this time I was familiar to the Commission and staff, and known at least by some to be a serious and reliable witness. Perseverance and patience, and being ready to exploit the right opportunity, seem to be keys to success in moving public policy. Of course, without the Coastal Commission, none of this would have been possible.

The new bridge spanning the Noyo River was completed in August 2005. Everyone was delighted with the sweeping vistas from the bridge and with the elegance of the railings. Caltrans held a big, self-congratulatory private ceremony, with a guest list of community leaders and politicians. I was not invited, but I heard that several local speakers lauded my contribution. At the public opening ceremony, the mayor of Fort Bragg gave me the major credit for the scenic qualities of the bridge.

Later, in a complete reversal of its earlier attitude toward me, the Fort Bragg City Council issued a proclamation commending me for protecting the scenic views from new bridges along California's coast.

There is a final lesson here: Persevering until success is achieved will garner approval and respect from many of those who opposed you at the height of the conflict. Don't give up.

Postscript: The struggle to preserve coastal scenic views and values continues. Caltrans is

presently working on two new bridges on Highway 1 in highly scenic rural areas. Major issues of contention are the width of shoulders and the height of railings for bicyclists—both of which come down to arguments over the appropriate balance of safety concerns, coastal values, and public desires.

For more information on the ST-10 scenic railing and its origins, and to join the ongoing effort to preserve bridge views, see www.bridgerailings.org. ■

Vince Taylor, who has a degree in physics from the California Institute of Technology and a Ph.D. in economics from MIT, lives in the village of Mendocino. He spent 20 years doing policy analysis on a variety of projects for the Rand Corporation and other organizations, and for ten years headed a software business he had founded. Since the mid-1990s he has worked on local public service projects, including the Noyo Bridge and Jackson State Forest (see www.jacksonforest.org).

Views from Fort Bragg

IN 1998, WHEN VINCE TAYLOR stood up to protect views from the bridge, there was very little coastal access in Fort Bragg. Now much of the shoreline is open and soon almost the entire five miles of waterfront will be in City ownership, according to City Manager Linda Ruffing. While Taylor led citizens opposed to the concrete bridge railing, City Councilman Dan Gjerde became locally famous as "the million-dollar man" because he won that much for the City from Caltrans. His appeal to the Coastal Commission for \$2 million to mitigate damage to coastal resources was settled for \$1 million.

These funds enabled the city to buy 20 acres for Pomo Bluffs Park. Opened in April, 2006, it provides opportunities to stroll along the bluffs watching boats coming in and out of the harbor. The park also provides an important link in the California Coastal Trail.

Somewhat earlier, Glass Beach had been purchased through efforts by the Coastal Conservancy with other agencies. Blufftop property on the closed Georgia-Pacific mill site is in the process of being acquired by the City.

The value of these parks and trails is growing as the local economy continues to change. "We're on the cusp of a major demographic transition here," said Diana Stuart, who chaired the City's planning commission during the bridge battle. "The day after the mill closed, real estate values started to go up." Many of the people now moving into the community are "equity refugees," she said. "You can sell a home in Los Angeles or San Francisco and get something nice here. We have a fairly large contingent of affluent retirees. They bring capital and use services." If you have to earn a living on the North Coast, however, "you either have to be creative, start your own business, be a professional—a doctor or attorney—or be willing to work very hard," Stuart said. "We also have telecommuters, people who go to San Francisco or L.A. once a month or so."

In the future, "we'll be somewhat tourism-based," she predicted. "I hope it will be green tourism. We have a long stretch of accessible coast."

—RG