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Tunnel champion Mike Vasey to speak at Pacifica's Earth Day Festival

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POSTED: 04/09/2013 05:02:36 PM PDT |

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Mike Vasey, Ph.D. is a biology and geology lecturer at San Francisco State University. A trained botanist and conservation biologist, Vasey is a recent past president of the California Botanical Society, past president of the Pacifica Land Trust (and still involved with both organizations), and has worked many years as a wetlands conservationist and researcher. He was one of the founding members of the Pacifica Open Space Committee and has served as president of the Pedro Point Community Association. A councilmember of the Pacifica City Council from 90 to 92, Vasey was also a driving political force behind what many call, the Coastside's biggest environmental success story, the Tom Lantos Tunnels at Devil's Slide.

The 4,200-foot, twin-bore tunnels eliminate the need to drive along the precarious stretch of road, between Pacifica and Montara, that is prone to rockslides and land slippage. And it is because of concerned citizens and tireless campaigners, like Vasey, that the tunnels were built instead of an inland bypass, which would have caused untold damage to the safety and preservation of the area's wildlife, wetlands and plants. As such, ecological safety was priority. Also called the "People's Tunnels," these are the first major tunnels built by the California Department of Transportation in 50 years.

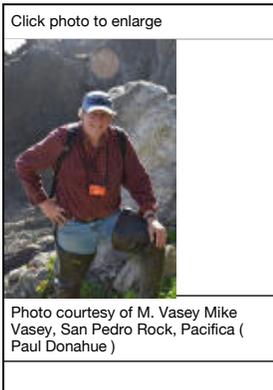
Dr. Vasey will be one of the featured speakers, Saturday, April 20, at the Pacifica Beach Coalition's Earth Day Environmental Festival, which begins at 11:30 am and immediately follows the PBC's Earth Day Action — cleanups, habitat restoration, gardening — which begins at 9 am. Other speakers include Sea Shepherd crewmember and photographer Lincoln Shaw and the event's keynote speaker, shark conservationist David McGuire.

A Pacifican since 1983, Vasey became aware of Pacifica when he was a master's student at SFSU. "I was studying a little native California annual wildflower, goldfields, that only grows on seabird breeding habitats," Vasey said. "One of the places I scoped out doing my research was Shelter Cove." Vasey fell for Pacifica immediately and moved to Pedro Point. He and his family have resided in the Point since.

During his first 12 years as a Pacifican, the scientist spent a great deal of his time on San Pedro Mountain and Montara Mountain and really got to know the native ecosystem. It was in 1995, that he became active in the tunnel campaign.

In 1995, Devil's Slide had one of the longest road closures in its history — 158 days. The public was outraged. The County and Caltrans pushed for construction of an inland bypass, an idea, along with the more environmentally-sensitive tunnel proposition, that had been around since 1973.

"I was passionately against the scale of what was going to happen if they put the bypass there," Vasey said, "and I backed the tunnel, right from the beginning. A big part of my motivation was to save the mountain from that disturbance. From the perspective of the natural environment, that is such a sensitive place with so many unique species and ecosystems."



Vasey said for his part, he was very active in lobbying the City Council, the Chamber of Commerce, and the Board of Supervisors to get those tunnels built.

"But it was really a relay race, with people who came in at all different times and made all the difference," Vasey noted. "Lennie Roberts called Caltrans in 1968, and she remained completely involved throughout. Tyler Ahlgren, the former co-owner of Shamrock Ranch, provided the marine disposal information."

Vasey also highlighted Pacifican Mitch Reid, who through the Freedom of Information Act, was able to secure a 1993 internal memo from the then Caltrans Chief of the Division of Structures, James Roberts, which proved the tunnels were not cost prohibitive, as had been the constant "no" to the tunnel argument. Zoe-Kerstean Tucker, Ollie Mayer — all of these individuals were among the powerful stream of private citizens whom Vasey joined, to get the tunnels done.

On November 5, 1996, 76% of San Mateo County voters approved Measure T, an initiative stating voter preference of the construction of a tunnel over the construction of an inland bypass. Congressman Tom Lantos was instrumental in securing funding for the project.

"I have so much respect for what Congressman Tom Lantos accomplished in his career," Vasey said. "The tunnels wouldn't have happened without everybody. It was a community effort, a grass roots effort, that really worked and eventually resonated with the powers that be. I have never seen anything like it."

An additional bonus of the project is the bypassed stretch of road will be transitioned into a state park, with bike trails and walking paths.

"It was such a win for the environment to have this place remain," Vasey said. "But I also believe by doing this, we have preserved an asset that will help make the future of Pacifica brighter, and it will generate an economy in Pacifica. We have to keep our eyes on the prize."

"What people don't realize, in the debate about when will recreation turn the economy around," Vasey continued, "is we could end up like the Marin Headlands, which makes huge amounts of money for their local communities."

Vasey said that one of the most important things about "environment" is that people fight for it.

"Don't discount the passion of many people who care about their community and their environment. The construction of the tunnels is more than just an event. It is a saga. It embodies raising consciousness about the importance of environment and how that environment is integral to our quality of life. And ultimately, I think it is very heartening that Caltrans was influenced by the environmentalists, the Coastal Commission, the politicians — the people. And Caltrans did a very fine job. They are like kids in the candy shop with those tunnels. They are so proud."

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