

A COMMUNITY VOICES ITS VISION



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## CITY OF ALBANY – VOICES TO VISION

For four decades, the 190-acre waterfront of Albany, California, had been the focus of a bitter tug-of-war between residents. Some hoped to see commercial development at the 102-acre, privately-owned portion that is currently used as a horse racetrack in order to maintain and/or increase tax revenues to the city. Others favored transforming the parcel into a public park (open space). Over four decades, numerous proposals were put forward by the landowner and private developers who sought to “maximize” the use of the property and its breathtaking views of San Francisco’s skyline and the Golden Gate and Bay bridges. But citywide discussions of these proposals seemed to only deepen the divide between the two viewpoints.

The discord over the waterfront was intensified when, in the wake of a recent developer-driven proposal for the site, a slate of “pro-park/anti-commercial development” candidates was elected to the Albany City Council. To complicate the situation, the racetrack had been experiencing a significant decline in attendance, as a result of off-track and Internet betting, which impacted its tax commitment to the City. Once widely considered the most important local business, the racetrack was now seen by many in a new light.

### PROJECT DATE:

2008 - 2012

### SECTOR: Land use;

development; urban design

### FTA SKILLS AND SERVICES:

Analysis and synthesis;  
process design; strategic  
community outreach;  
branding, messaging,  
collateral development  
(print and electronic);  
web design, development,  
and management;  
facilitation of city-wide  
participatory engagement;  
documentation;  
presentation of findings and  
recommendations for urban  
waterfront design guidelines

*The city of Albany, California (1.7 square miles, .3 square miles of which is waterfront property) is home to approximately 17,000 residents. At times it seemed as if there was an equal number of opinions about the future of the city’s waterfront.*

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The potential closure of the track and subsequent bankruptcy in 2009 appeared to some residents to be an opportunity to turn the property into a large public park; others felt the lack of public funds to purchase, transform, and maintain the land, and the need for replacement tax revenue, should be at the forefront of waterfront decisionmaking.

With the future of the site in question, and the contentious nature of the issue at a fever pitch, the newly-installed city council needed to be proactive. As a result of a citizen-initiated mandate in 1990, a vote of residents would be required in order to make any land use changes to the site (should the race track cease operations). So, in 2008, rather than wait to react to yet another developer-driven proposal, the city decided to find out what Albany residents really wanted at the waterfront.

In May of that year, the city of Albany hired Fern Tiger Associates (FTA) to conceive, design, and facilitate a process to educate and engage residents in a process they hoped would lead to a shared vision for the waterfront. Based on the complex history of waterfront planning in Albany, FTA knew it needed to convince residents of the objectivity and neutrality of the process that would unfold; to build trust in the open and inclusive nature of *Voices to Vision* (as the process came to be named); to educate the broad community with facts related to the waterfront; and to establish the reliability of the information presented.

*During this project, a young couple called with an unusual request: the Voices to Vision session for their neighborhood fell on the due date of their first child. Could they attend a later session...after the baby was born? Sure enough, at a session a month later, they arrived with a newborn in tow; eight months later, they returned for the second round of sessions with an adorable, red-haired baby. That baby – the youngest attendee – represented the generations-yet-to-be, while at another session a 90-year-old who'd lived in Albany her entire life participated with vigor.*

*Albany households reflect an unusually high percent of professionals with college and graduate degrees.*

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Moreover, the process needed to respond to the concerns, issues, perceptions, and misperceptions of the community. But, most important, the process would need to offer opportunities for residents to provide meaningful input in an innovative and well-documented format.

Several weeks before the launch of the first round of participatory community sessions, FTA mailed, first class, a 20–page tabloid-sized publication to every Albany address. Filled with rich text, photographs, maps, and graphics, the newsletter covered the environmental, land use, economic, historic, and regulatory issues relevant to the waterfront. A comprehensive list of frequently asked questions was organized by topic area, to allow easy access to specific facts; and a glossary of commonly used planning terms was also included. A companion website was developed to include similar information and to keep the community abreast of new findings and issues, as well as updated information regarding the process as it unfolded.

In May and June of 2009, FTA facilitated 38 identical sessions, which ranged in size from 10 to 50 participants. The centerpiece of the sessions was “The Albany Waterfront Game,” where small groups of up to five residents sat together at tables to discuss their desires for, and concerns about, the site. They were given a site map (scaled at 1”:200’), and plastic chips (color-coded by land use e.g. hotel, museum, retail, open space, etc.), tax revenue information based on “use,” and data about the height of any potential building.



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Working together, each table group determined which uses to include (commercial and/or open space and/or public benefit “development”) and where to locate the chips on the site map. Participants considered and discussed the desired amount of open space, tax revenue generated, community benefits, and site concerns. For the first time in 40 years, residents were not reacting to a proposal – instead, they were thinking realistically about goals for the future of the site.

FTA organized the sessions by neighborhood, and held them at public places (community center, senior center, and schools). By limiting participation at these sessions to Albany residents, and allowing individuals to attend just one session, FTA sought to address two complaints about earlier citywide processes – that people who lived outside of Albany dominated the discussions and that sequential meetings attract a small core of repeat attendees who are fixated on the waterfront, rather than “everyday residents” who care about the waterfront as well as other local issues, and do not have the time to invest in multiple meetings.

To gather as wide a range of participants as possible, sessions were offered for non-English speakers (Spanish and Chinese) and those needing child care. Separate sessions were held for regional stakeholders who live outside of Albany, and for students at Albany High School. At the conclusion of 38 sessions held over a short, six-week period, 199 detailed, annotated site maps had been created by nearly 800 people (98% were Albany residents).





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To clarify some terms and reach an even wider audience, FTA created and analyzed an on-line survey a few months later.

Then, in January 2010, FTA held 10 second-round sessions over one weekend (and one identical session for non-residents). The focal point for these sessions was a series of six “conceptual” scenarios (specifically related to the 102-acre, privately-owned portion of the property). These concepts grew out of the ideas and thinking generated by the community in the Albany Waterfront Game, combined with additional information from the questionnaire and from a range of professional experts (economists, planners, architects, geotechnical engineers, transportation planners, environmentalists, public safety officials, cost estimators, etc.).

The six scenarios represented a range of options – from a 98-acre park, to a mix of open space and development, to a concept that included a great deal of commercial development, to one that retained the racetrack. Residents were encouraged to discuss the conceptual scenarios at their tables of six, and then to weigh in (as individuals) on the various attributes of each plan.

Feedback gathered throughout *Voices to Vision* was used to inform the development of a set of guidelines for Albany’s waterfront.

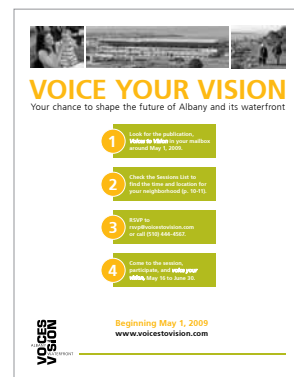
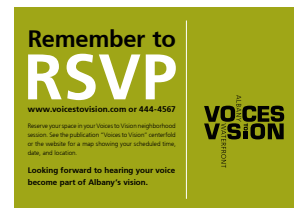


*The Albany community envisioned a 190-acre waterfront that is a model of environmental and economic sustainability; that supports a multi-generational community, small-scale, independently-owned businesses, and local arts, culture, and cuisine.*

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With about one in ten adult residents voicing their ideas about the future of the waterfront in one or more ways throughout the *Voices to Vision* process, residents appear to have a newfound sense of hope about the site. More than half of those who participated said they believe that *Voices to Vision* will lead to a coherent approach regarding the future of the waterfront and an additional 35% stated they “hope it will.” Moreover, residents who were known to have had extremely different opinions about the future of the site worked together to establish shared concerns and desires. Out of these discussions, and out of the “common ground” that residents found with one another, a vision for the future of the Albany waterfront was articulated. It recognizes the importance of the entire site and of the extended impact the Albany waterfront has on the region.

The 100-page report, backed by 850 pages of data, findings, and other information gathered throughout the process includes site standards, design guidelines, and illustrative conceptual scenarios that indicate possible development opportunities. The guidelines add two new uses (hotel and retail) to current zoning, with square footage and acreage restrictions, ensuring the creation of a 163-acre public park (including 75 acres within the now-privately-owned area).



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## VOICES TO VISION 2



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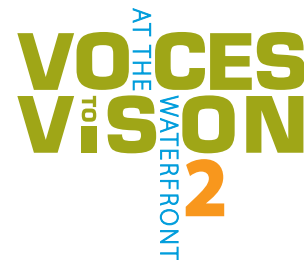
In February of 2011, less than one year after Fern Tiger Associates finished the 18-month community engagement process and following publication of the resulting report, “A Community Vision for Albany’s Waterfront,” the City of Albany again reached out for assistance.

The Albany Waterfront had been selected as one of six potential sites for Lawrence Berkeley National Laboratory (LBNL), which sought to expand its Berkeley-based location. It was made clear to LBNL that Albany’s outreach and engagement process would need to reflect the openness and well-informed community aspects that drove *Voices to Vision* – which had been an open-ended dialog about possible next steps. This time the conversation needed to focus on a real proposal with specific and articulated requirements – many of which did not match the community’s vision.

As a result of the Albany community’s experience with *Voices to Vision*, they now demanded a transparent discussion informed by community values, much like the previous FTA-led process.

So FTA designed *Voices to Vision 2*, a new decision-making process which built on the trust, interest, information, community knowledge, and awareness of the earlier process.

*Between 2009 and 2011, the ownership of Golden Gate Fields changed hands three times; one change was the result of bankruptcy.*



*When the LBNL project surfaced, The Stronach Group (a family-owned company, with long-standing ties to the previous ownership of the site) had recently taken over responsibility for Golden Gate Fields – the first time the community sensed interest in the site from the owners.*

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Like the first phase, *Voices to Vision 2* reflected a commitment to fact-based, neutral, and clear information that would be available to all residents. The process was kicked off with a letter to each Albany resident and business owner, along with Frequently Asked Questions and a transcript of an FTA interview with representatives of Golden Gate Fields – to bring all of Albany up to speed on this new development.

A series of 2-hour participatory sessions, facilitated by FTA in a small group format, educated participants about LBNL and its project needs, as well as site opportunities and challenges; solicited informed commentary; collected information and ideas; provide analysis of suggestions and enabled participants to learn, while simultaneously engaging in dialog on the future of the waterfront.

Recognizing the large number of unanswered questions and large amount of missing information, the City created a 22-member Waterfront Task Force which the Council requested be facilitated by FTA. This body met nearly weekly for eight weeks in preparation for a City Council workshop at which the members presented their findings. Each week, FTA prepared comprehensive packets of information to ensure productive discussion.

Based on the vast amount of information presented, after five Task Force sessions FTA prepared a document summarizing known facts, perceptions, and outstanding questions. The culmination of the Task Force's work was a meeting with the Albany City Council, which focused on the pros/cons/opportunities identified by the Task Force, and was supported by the FTA-created document.



### VOICES TO VISION 2

A process to discuss the  
future of the Albany Waterfront

[www.voicestovision.com](http://www.voicestovision.com)

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As in previous debates about the waterfront conversation focused on the value of open space and what the community would be willing to accept (in terms of development, environmental impacts, etc.) in order to protect open space and preserve their tax base. Ultimately, the Golden Gate Fields site was not selected as the future home of LBNL's second campus, with the University of California instead opting for a site that UC already owned. But for the Albany community, *Voices to Vision* – in both of its phases – was significant and successful in its remarkable ability to lead residents through a transformative process to revisit an issue that had historically been contentious and divisive. Emerging from the *Voices to Vision* process with a newfound sense that compromise could be achieved in ways that did not water down high aspirations or diminish pragmatic goals, the Albany community quickly responded to a development proposal from Golden Gate Fields with the confidence that they deserved to be informed, heard, and respected in a comprehensive community review process.

