

## For Novato Citizen of the Year, it's in Bill Long's Nature to Preserve Nature

By Brent Ainsworth

Bill Long does not take nature for granted. He grew up loving it and has worked a lifetime to preserve it. Novato doesn't take Long for granted, though.

After more than 50 years of local service in leadership roles, especially when it comes to issues with water and land, Bill Long was named the 2024 Novato Citizen of the Year. A Novato resident since 1969, Long was chosen by a committee of former Citizens of the Year and honored before more than 200 people during the Novato City Birthday Party, held Friday, January 24, at the Buck Center. Long soaked in the ovation with his wife, Teili, and several family members.

Also, the party revelers paid tribute to several other award winners.

- Zachary Griggy was given the 2024 Spirit of Novato Award for his civic work during the past year.
- The Novato Police Department's Employees of the Year, Officer Lucas Hlebakos & Management Analyst Lauren Grant
- The Novato Fire Protection District's Employees of the Year, Engineer/Paramedic Jason Zanoni & Mechanic David Mezquito
- The Novato Chamber's Businesses of the Year were also recognized, Marin Humane (large business), Topo Chiropractic (small business), and Miriam Martinez Consulting (micro business).

Looking back, the most revered civic volunteers in Novato's history have tended to focus on preserving and enhancing the quality of life for everyone in the community. In reality, Citizens of the Year are not chosen for what they accomplished in one particular year but rather over many decades of service. These residents, accumulated annually with a new member since 1971, essentially join an unofficial Novato Hall of Fame.

Bill Long is a worthy member of the exclusive club. His legacy includes exemplary service on influential bodies such as the Marin County Planning Commission, the Marin County Parks and Open Space Commission, the County Zone 1 Flood Control Board, the North Bay Water Reuse Authority, the Novato Sanitary District Board, the Bay Area Ridge Trail Board, the Marin Open Space Trust, and several others.

The Marin County Board of Supervisors recently passed a resolution to honor Bill Long for this award, and the summation mentioned that “Bill Long’s over 50 years of volunteerism, vision, and leadership have greatly enriched the quality of life in Novato and the greater Marin community. The Board celebrates his extraordinary contributions to the environment, public service, and the community at large.”

Trail development and management became an issue near and dear to Bill Long when the San Francisco Bay Ridge Trail was proposed. He served on the Board of Directors and as chair of the organization, realizing the trail vision, and today is chair emeritus. After years of trail planning and development, Long was picked to share his tips and secrets in the book *Trail Planning for California Communities*.

For decades, Long envisioned linked trails around the perimeter of bay. He and his Ridge Trail compadres plan, promote, and sustain the connected hiking, cycling, and equestrian trail that links people, parks, and open spaces. Charlie Long said when he’s gone on hikes and mountain bike rides, he pays attention to the posted signage with the names of the trails and the Bay Ridge Trail logo.

“I’m always reminding myself, hey, my dad had something to do with that,” Charlie Long said. “That he’s taken all this time to help give people freedom to enjoy these trails is a really honorable thing. He’s still working hard on it, including with Congressman (Jared) Huffman to get national recognition for it. He knows it’ll take 10 years to go through the proper pipes to get that support, but the way it’s going, he’s going to still be around to see it happen.”

Long grew up in Rhode Island, our nation’s smallest state. At its furthest boundaries, Rhode Island is 48 miles long and 37 miles wide. For scale, traveling the entire length of Rhode Island would be roughly the same trip as Novato City Hall to San Mateo, Vacaville, Walnut Creek, or Geyserville. Rhode Island’s square mileage equals about two Marin Countys.

As the son of a father who was health care administrator and a mother who worked as a bookkeeper, Long grew up in the city of Warwick, which for many years was the second-largest city in Rhode Island after his birthplace, Providence. Rhode Island is densely populated on one side – near Narragansett Bay – and lightly populated in the woodsy west. It’s just like Marin County in that aspect. So Long grew up appreciating nature, sailing on the bay and hiking in the forests.

Even before he got to his teens, Long showed interest in sciences and engineering. His sister, Barbie – that’s “Bobby” in a Rhode Island accent – remembered that her bright brother caused some mild trouble in classrooms when his curiosity would get the best of him. One time at Aldrich Junior High, he caused something to explode.

Barbie said it's likely that the chemical reaction led directly to Bill setting a goal of attending Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). A few years later, he earned his bachelor's degree in chemical engineering from there and then a master's degree from Rensselaer Polytechnic Institute (RPI) in Troy, New York.

Bill married Carol Lind in 1960 and focused on his career in the oil industry. They traveled the world and settled in the Netherlands for a time. It was during that span in Holland when Bill and Carol welcomed their first two children, Charlie and Elizabeth (Betsy). Much later, the family relocated to Terra Linda, and son Jonathan joined the brood after the family moved to Novato. Their favorite family activities tended to revolve around camping, hiking, sailing, and enjoying epic meals with friends and family. The kids were also exposed to the arts and theater, even Shakespeare, and prioritized international travel. Carol died of cancer in 1999.

When the boys were in Scouting (both achieved Eagle Scout honors), Bill was active in Scouting leadership and ran an Explorer post that taught the kids about sailing and safe boating. It was a near-and-dear assignment for Long, who sailed in the Ocean State as a youngster. Bill Long taught the youngsters the ropes on the Sea Scouts boat that is still based in the Canal neighborhood of San Rafael. For years, Bill had his own 10 Meter Pearson sailboat birthed not far away at the Loch Lomond harbor and sometimes over in Richmond.

Bill served on the Marin County Planning Commission in the early 1970s and worked on the ballot measure that created the Marin County Parks and Open Space District in 1972. He then served on the OSD board for 10 years while continuing his professional career as an engineer for oil companies. He locations all over the county so he could research environmental effects of potential developments before a Planning Commission vote.

It was time to dabble in politics. The first time he ran for office was in 1976 when there was an open seat on the Novato Sanitary District Board of Directors. Son Charlie helped with placing political signs all over town, and Betsy got a kick out of the campaign events and eating some of the hotdogs that were being given away.

Starting with his first board term with the Novato Sanitary District, Bill Long became best known in North Bay water circles as a pioneer in the promotion of water recycling. The concept of reuse led him and others to spearhead the formation of the North Bay Water Reuse Authority and its North Bay Water Recycling Program, which now encompasses over 350 square miles in portions of Marin, Sonoma, and Napa counties surrounding San Pablo Bay. The program, started in 2002, is a coordinated effort of 11 municipal water and wastewater agencies to develop recycled water and build capacity and resiliency into the region's water supply.

During his second stint on the NSD Board, from 2001 to 2022, Long supported the district's creation of facilities to provide recycled water for landscaping in the Novato area. With that effort, the amount of potable water Novato buys from Sonoma Water is now 75% of Novato's supply instead of 80%. The drought that parched the North Bay from 2020 to 2022 only showed how important that 5% reduction in freshwater use could be, and only solidified Long's respect among his water-minded peers.

Long has disaster preparedness in mind as well, having lived through devastating floods in Novato several times – most notably in winter 1982. He has also served on the Novato Flood Control Advisory Board overseeing the management of Novato Creek to prevent flooding in the developed areas of the floodplain. He is the current chair.

Several nearby counties had open space trusts that collaborated with municipalities to preserve open spaces for nature preservation and recreation. Marin County had one specifically for saving West Marin agricultural lands from development, but it didn't have one to prevent natural lands closer to suburbia from getting paved over. So, in 2008, Long founded the Marin Open Space Trust (MOST) and has served as its chair since its inception.

One of the first MOST projects was helping Pacheco Valle preserve the meadow at the entrance to the 600-home neighborhood in southern Novato. The neighbors had participated in tense and tedious negotiations to preserve the greenbelt area, which contained a native Miwok burial ground. Long and MOST stepped in to help the residents purchase the property and turn it over to the County's Open Space District. The 2014 transaction not only protected nearby Pacheco Creek, but it reduced congestion and wildfire threats at the community's one and only entry and exit point.

Former Novato Mayor Susan Stompe, the 2013 Novato Citizen of the Year, met Bill Long in the early 1970s through wife Carol, who like Stompe was involved in the League of Women Voters. A legendary local environmental advocate, Stompe found that Bill Long had a fascination for the environmental review process that needs to take place prior to many project developments. She did, too, and they studied and provided input on solid waste disposal at the Redwood Landfill, water recycling infrastructure, and waste hauler contracts.

"After 20 or 30 years, our paths kept crossing and I really got to know him," Stompe said. "He has been consistent serving the community in a variety of ways and in a very quiet and diligent manner. I have felt that he is dedicated to these issues and has devoted a lot of personal time and energy to them. He has made huge contributions over a very long period of time."

Now 87, Bill Long still leads the Novato Sons in Retirement (SIRs) branch on occasional hikes in Novato. He shares his accumulated hyperlocal knowledge during public meetings, advocating for environmental causes and smart planning. In his down time, he occasionally lights a cigar and hand-picks a prime choice from his wine collection.

Betsy Long, who now lives in the Sierra foothills, described her dad a straight shooter. "I'm very proud of him," she said. "He's a renaissance man. I wish I able to do as much as he's done."

Son Charlie added, "He's amazing ... doing better than I am physically, even at 87." Jon said with his dad's Citizen of the Year notoriety, he's just realizing how much his father contributed to his hometown.

"I might have underappreciated the gravity of how important he was to everybody all those years," Jon Long said. "I won't anymore."