



City of Sebastopol

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Mayor
 Sarah Glade Gurney
 City Council
 Una Glass, Vice Mayor
 John Eder
 Robert Jacob
 Patrick Slayter

City Manager/City
 Attorney
 Larry McLaughlin
 City Clerk
 Mary Gourley

Agenda Report Reviewed by:
 City Manager/City Attorney 

Meeting Date: Meeting of December 15, 2015
To: Mayor and City Council
From: Kenyon Webster, Planning Director
Subject: Laguna de Santa Rosa Wetlands Preserve Management Plan
Recommendation: Approve Plan
Funding: Currently Budgeted: Yes No N/A
 Net General Fund Cost:
 If Cost to Other Fund(s),

Introduction: Pursuant to City Council direction, a draft Laguna de Santa Rosa Preserve Management Plan has been prepared in a public process. In addition to several public workshops, the Planning Commission has served as a forum for development of the Plan. The Commission is recommending approval of the Plan, with consideration of comments made in the public process.

Pursuant to Commission direction, the consultant and staff team have reviewed comments and are recommending several revisions. The revised Plan is recommended for approval.

The Council conducted a hearing on the draft Plan on November 3, and continued it to allow time for further public comment and Council deliberation.

Background: The City's Laguna de Santa Rosa Wetlands Preserve has been created over a number of years following adoption of the 1992 Laguna Park Master Plan.

The Master Plan created a vision for protection and enhancement of the Laguna in the Sebastopol area, and guided the later creation of the Laguna Preserve. Unlike the City's urban parks, the Preserve has never been intended to be an intensely developed or active recreation area; rather it is intended to focus on maintaining and restoring natural ecological functions and values, with a secondary goal of some low-impact public access. As articulated by a Council member at the last discussion, the differences between an urban 'park' and a 'preserve' may provide a conceptual framework for considering the draft Management Plan.

The Preserve has been developed in multiple stages on several distinct properties beginning in 1998, transforming areas once used for waste disposal (a City dump; a sewage treatment plant; an apple waste disposal area) into a valued 'natural' public open space area. Thousands of native trees and shrubs have been planted, and several miles of trails developed.

The Preserve includes the following City-owned lands:

- Areas surrounding the Laguna Youth Park/Community Center/Youth Annex
- Areas west of the Laguna channel and east of Morris Street, behind (in some cases) private property fronting on Morris Street
- Meadowlark Field, north of Highway 12 on the east side of the Laguna channel
- The City's newest park, Tomodachi Park, next door to the Village Mobile Home site

- The Railroad Forest, located north of the Joe Rodota Trail

The City developed the Preserve with a combination of local funding, volunteers, and grants from numerous sources. Several major grants have been received, including from the California Coastal Conservancy, State Parks, and the Wildlife Conservation Board.

A major funding partner was the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District, which helped the City purchase the Railroad Forest and Tomodachi Park properties, provided a major restoration grant at Meadowlark Field, and provided substantial funding for construction of Tomodachi Park.

Conservation easements were recorded to protect the values of lands where the District provided the City with financial assistance. The City is obligated to maintain these values.

After expressing some concerns about implementation of a volunteer project at the Railroad Forest property, the District asked the City to prepare a management plan to set forth its protocols for maintenance, restoration and improvement of the properties with District easements. Since the Laguna Preserve sites without such easements have the same environmental and management issues, the Management Plan also encompasses those properties, as the City Council felt that it would be appropriate to undertake a comprehensive review of conditions, needs, and opportunities.

Using Special Sales tax monies, the City Council set aside funding in this year's budgeting to prepare a Laguna Preserve Management Plan. After a competitive selection process, Prunuske Chatham and subcontractor the Laguna Foundation were retained to prepare the Plan.

As detailed in the draft Plan and in public comment, there are issues regarding maintenance, invasive species, public access, appropriate improvements, illegal camping, lack of identity, insufficient connectivity, and appropriate restoration/improvement protocols.

Project objectives include:

- Inventory and describe the Preserve properties including all natural habitats and human infrastructure;
- Summarize existing City plans and policies relating to the Preserve;
- Summarize other applicable regulations;
- Summarize existing restrictions applying to Preserve properties, such as Open Space easements;
- Identify issues and opportunities for restoration/enhancement and public access;
- Identify target condition of properties;
- Set forth best management practices for resource management and erosion control;
- Identify maintenance needs;
- Set forth protocols for improvements, such as native plant restoration projects and trails;

- Provide a general framework for monitoring, preserving, protecting, improving, and maintaining Preserve resources;
- Describe the City's long-term plan for on-going management;
- Identify appropriate elements of an on-going maintenance program;
- Provide estimates of annual staffing and budgeting needs.

The public process to date has included a presentation to the Planning Commission, an initial public workshop to identify issues and receive public input, a 'walking workshop' to gather further input, and public hearings before the Planning Commission and City Council. Information about the Plan has been provided in the City newsletter, and in widely-distributed bulletins to interested persons and organizations. There has also been outreach to regulatory and other agencies, and technical revisions were included in the draft Plan in response to some agency comments.

A major intent of the Plan is to determine if the City should consider different maintenance protocols, and/or budget additional resources. While in a number of cases jurisdictions may have funding for capital improvements, provision of on-going maintenance resources is sometimes lacking. Often, long-term maintenance needs are insufficiently appreciated. The Plan indicates that additional maintenance resources are needed to appropriately maintain the Preserve. This will be a significant budget consideration for the City Council.

Grant Application: There has been a dearth of grant opportunities for park projects until recently. A major, time-sensitive opportunity was identified with the River Parkways grant program, and using information developed in the draft Plan, City and Laguna Foundation staff collaborated on a grant proposal for nearly \$500,000 to fund Preserve restoration, interpretive and wayfinding signs, and the connectivity improvements identified in the draft Plan. The application is pending.

Environmental Review: The proposed use is categorically exempt from the requirements of CEQA pursuant to Section 15307, Actions by Regulatory Agencies for the Protection of Natural Resources, in that the primary intent of the Plan is protection of natural resources; and Section 15301, Existing Facilities, in that the Plan is addressing an existing public park, and also identifies minor restoration and trail improvement projects (while not implementing such projects).

Public Comment: Appendix 7 in the Plan provides detailed comments that were provided through the initial outreach process. An attachment to the November 3 report summarized comments from the 'walking workshop.'

Also provided with the November 3 report were the minutes of the Planning Commission's hearing on the Plan, and comments submitted to the Commission at that time. Other public comments were provided for the Council's consideration with the November 3 report.

The City's consultants and staff have reviewed comments made at the November 3 Council hearing, and prepared analysis and response to comments made (attached).

Analysis: Below is staff's analysis regarding some of the major issues raised in the public process.

Objective of Preserve. Some comments express the opinion that human needs and improvements should receive higher priority. Per the 1992 Laguna Park Plan, the intent, or policy purpose of the Preserve is restoration and protection of the natural Laguna environment—with human access/improvements minimized, or secondary.

As stated in the 1992 Master Plan: "The main focus of the Laguna de Santa Rosa Park is Laguna environments preservation and restoration..." This principle has guided development of the Management Plan. Low impact public access and education is an appropriate element in the Preserve, but is intended

to be secondary to protection and restoration of natural features.

At times in the Preserve's history it has been a challenge to maintain the Preserve's values and objectives when there are legitimate 'improvement' ideas that may serve other needs.

The line between appropriate and inappropriate improvements is not always clear, but is guided by the Park Master Plan, by the City's own history of improvements, and by guidance from the Open Space District and regulatory agencies. Based on these considerations, some concepts, such as removing vegetation to uncover old railroad tracks, place a rail car in the area, eliminate native habitat plants such as Poison Oak, or to remove vegetation or logs provide kayak access, are not recommended.

Himalayan Blackberry Removal. Some comments suggested this is not a priority in the Plan. This is inaccurate. Himalayan blackberry is listed in the Plan as one of the top priority invasive species for removal throughout the Preserve, including Railroad Forest. Its removal is called out as a key component of Restoration Opportunities B (Youth Park Northwest Corner), E (Youth Park Southwest Corner), F (AmeriCorps Trail near Lift Station), and G (Railroad Forest).

Illegal Camping. There are issues with illegal camping in the Preserve, including trash, safety, and environmental impacts. As noted in the response to comments, the issue of homelessness, which is also related to affordable housing policy, substance abuse, criminal justice policy, and mental illness, is a major societal challenge that goes far beyond the scope of the Preserve Management Plan.

While the Management Plan cannot solve these problems, there are actions identified in the Plan that the City can take to better maintain the Preserve, including additional trash and recycling receptacles, and more frequent maintenance and law enforcement patrols. City departments would require more resources to implement these actions.

Separate from the Management Plan, the City can review affordable housing issues, needs, and resources in implementing the Housing Element of the General Plan, and making policy choices in the development of a new Land Use Element, and implementing policy via Zoning Ordinance and other code amendments.

Public Access. Some comments suggested the Plan does not provide adequate public access. However, there are thousands of feet of trails in the Preserve, and multiple points of open public access. Accessing the Preserve can be readily accomplished, and there are extensive trails.

Nearly all of the City's trails are unpaved, with the exception of the Railroad Forest bike trail connector, and old driveway segments behind the Youth Annex.

As noted, the primary purpose of the Preserve is environmental protection and restoration; modest, low-impact access is also appropriate, but based on long-standing City policy, should be limited. Improved public access to the Preserve is addressed in a number of ways, including the proposed addition of two new connector trails that will make key connections possible, and substantially improved wayfinding signage.

In terms of kayak access, it is currently possible to launch a kayak in the Preserve at various locations. While in concept, the desire for additional or improved kayak access is understandable, the reality of the Preserve waters is that except during flood periods, there is very limited area which is possible to kayak, given shallow waters in some sections, and in other areas, naturally-congested waterways (willows, logs, etc.) as well as the City's own seasonal floating bridge. The City does not have jurisdiction to dredge the channel or perform major vegetation removal in the channel, activities that might also compromise natural functions. Given these factors, implementing formal kayak access would be of limited actual benefit.

Public Input/Plan proposals. A comment suggested that the Plan did not adequately reflect the range of public input, particularly ideas for additional improvements. As noted, the Management Plan is guided by, and intended to maintain the vision of the Laguna Park Master Plan. Some ideas for improvements that were expressed in the public process appear to be in conflict with this vision and thus were not included in the recommended Plan. It is also noted that in prior public meetings, some other members of the public felt that no such improvements should be made, and that perhaps existing access should be further restricted to protect the natural areas.

Open Space District easements. Where they have provided funding for land acquisition, restoration, or improvements, the District is dedicated to maintain the conservation values of the subject property. The District requires permanent easements to restrict uses and improvements, and conducts annual property inspections, and also is required to review improvement proposals. The District rightly takes these responsibilities seriously, and has effective authority to deny project proposals, or to take other legal action if, in their view, agreements are not being honored.

Certain volunteer activities facilitated by the City in the Railroad Forest were of significant concern to the District as being in possible conflict with the District's view of conservation values for the property, and were part of the reason why the District asked that the City develop a management plan for how affected properties should be maintained and improved. These volunteer activities also raised the possibility of stormwater pollution enforcement action against the City by the Regional Water Quality Control Board.

The consultant team and staff have received input from the District on the Plan, and have specifically consulted the District about some ideas such as placement of rail car, and development of a new trail along Calder Creek. District staff did not support either concept.

Other Comments. Some comments with technical information or corrections were received; the City's consultants will review these and make appropriate revisions to the final Plan.

Maintenance Needs. One purpose of the Plan was to review maintenance needs. Long-term maintenance is often the most challenging element for parks and other public facilities. Typically, there are no grant programs that fund maintenance, and generally, most maintenance activities do not inspire ongoing volunteer contributions, while some maintenance activities are not suitable for volunteers. The Plan indicates that there are substantial unmet maintenance needs.

Appendix 8 estimates the Preserve should have a budget of approximately \$155,000 for maintenance, training, and coordination. Current resources devoted to the Preserve are substantially less than this amount. If the Plan is adopted, staff will review the Plan and make funding proposals in the FY 2016-17 budget process. To the extent the Council finds that additional resources are needed, this will be significant consideration for City budgeting.

Revisions to draft Plan. City staff and the consultant team reviewed public and Commissioner input provided at the Planning Commission hearing and are recommending a number of revisions to the draft Plan. A summary of these issues is provided in an attachment, and an updated version of the Plan includes recommended revisions.

Key Issues: Key issues include:

- Whether Plan has sufficient information about Preserve resources, issues, and opportunities
- Whether the planned restoration and improvement projects are appropriate, and whether additional improvements should be considered
- Whether the Council has any comments on the estimates of maintenance needs

Recommendation: It is recommended that the Council receive any public comment, discuss the draft Plan, and adopt the Plan. If the Council desires revisions, specific direction is requested.

Attachments:

Responses to Issues Raised at November 3, 2015 Council Hearing
Public comments

**Sebastopol Laguna Wetlands Preserve Restoration and Management Plan
City Council Meeting, 11/3/2015 - Key Input and PCI Responses and Recommendations**

1. Public Access

Some speakers expressed a desire for greater public access—specifically, a trail adjacent to Calder Creek—while some speakers expressed a desire to prioritize wildlife habitat and ecological healing over additional human presence on the Preserve.

Response

- **Plan already increases public access** by recommending:
 - Two new trails, increasing access to the two most underutilized parts of the Preserve which are already developed for public use (Tomodachi, AmeriCorps Trail)
 - New benches in several locations, including Railroad Forest
 - Installation of new entry arbor and signage at the AmeriCorps Trail across from the Barlow
 - Further pursuit of a trail connection under Highway 12 after Caltrans work is complete.
- **The 104-acre Preserve has 4 miles of existing and proposed trails** (including the two proposed new trails, and the portion of the Rodota Trail that forms the southern boundary of the Railroad Forest). Of those 4 miles, 3.3 miles are unpaved. Many additional recommendations for increasing visitation, visibility, education and stewardship of the Preserve are also included in the Plan.
- **No restrictions exist, or are proposed, that prevent Preserve visitors from casual exploration off the trails.** People can and do visit the creek and Laguna currently, and with the proposed habitat restoration, these areas will become more visually and physically accessible in Railroad Forest in particular. The Plan does discourage the establishment of unofficial trails.
- **Construction of an additional trail along Calder Creek is likely to reduce native wildlife use of that area.** This trail would divide the riparian corridor along its length. Research is clear that increased human and dog presence results in negative effects on native wildlife. For example, such effects include declines in native wildlife diversity and abundance and reduced nesting success for riparian bird species. Some disturbance-adapted non-native species, like house sparrows and European starlings, may increase, which could have a detrimental effect on native wildlife. Invasive plant species also typically increase along trails.
- **The team has also received dozens of public comments requesting no increase in--or a reduction in--human and dog activity within the Preserve.** There is strong concern about the impacts of these on bird life in particular. There is, however, broad interest in connecting trails to each other and to other regional trails, and the plan supports this.
- **If a Calder Creek trail were intended to connect the Railroad Forest path directly with the proposed Tomodachi connector trail, it would require a creek crossing.** This may be feasible but would require some additional permitting, design, and maintenance efforts.
- **SCAPOS staff does not support development of a trail along Calder Creek.**

Recommendation

Team does not recommend an additional formal trail along Calder Creek but will await further direction from the City. Railroad Forest improvements require review by SCAPOS.

2. Kayaking

Some speakers expressed interest in improved kayak access from Preserve.

Response

- **Informal kayak access through the Preserve is currently possible and occasionally used.** Typical entry points are at the floating bridge or from the AmeriCorps Trail property just south of Zimpher Creek.
- **Formal kayak access may be available in the future from the Occidental Road pullout;** this is on SCAPOSD-owned land which is likely to be transferred to Regional Parks in the near future to be incorporated into Regional Parks' Laguna Trail lands. This location provides access to much more open water than on the Preserve.
- **Channel complexity, shallow spots, and locations with dense vegetation make boat travel very difficult or impossible** along the channel within the Preserve or immediately up- or downstream. Access is greatest during winter floods, but is still very constrained.
- **Removal of vegetation in or overhanging the channel would require approval from CDFW.** Along most of the Preserve, CDFW owns the Laguna channel. In Tomodachi, City property spans the channel. In either case, CDFW approval for work along the channel would be required. PCI's opinion is that CDFW approval of clearing is unlikely as vegetation provides valuable shade and habitat for wildlife and water quality, and for *Ludwigia* suppression. Shade reduces the high water temperatures which are considered a major impairment of the Laguna's health.
- If the City wants to develop a formal kayak launch on the Preserve despite these considerations, a possible location could be near the north end of the ball fields. This could be coordinated with potential restoration/reconfiguration of the old sewage ponds immediately to the north (which requires further study).

Recommendation

Team recommends no change to the plan, but will await further guidance from City. Improvements would require additional consultation with SCAPOSD and regulatory agencies.

3. Preserve Names

One speaker expressed interest in changing Preserve parcel names to Pomo names.

Response

- **Incorporation of local Native American language into Preserve names or educational components should be undertaken only after further research, and in consultation with local tribal representatives.** Most current Preserve names do have meaning to the community - either historic (Railroad Forest), ecological (Meadowlark), or references to groups served (youth) or groups involved in creation (AmeriCorps). In addition, any proposed names would need careful language and naming review to ensure accuracy and appropriateness.

Recommendation

For renaming of Preserve lands, team defers to City guidance. Team recommends suggesting in the Plan that local Native American language be incorporated into educational signage and other

educational programs, but only after further review, and with consultation from local tribal representatives.

Summary of Key Previous Input and Responses

4. Railroad Tracks in Railroad Forest

A member of the public expressed interest in uncovering the historic railroad tracks that run through Railroad Forest, as a place for visitors to walk and a way to highlight railroad history.

Response

The track will likely be exposed during the proposed blackberry removal from that area, and will be available informally for exploration. Eventually, native plantings may again overtake it. Regular removal of native vegetation from tracks and encouraging use as a trail will further fragment the riparian habitat, reducing value for wildlife. (The tracks run roughly northwest-southeast, roughly paralleling the creek, east of the bridge.) See Item 1 for related discussion.

Recommendation

Allow for uncovering of trail as part of site restoration. Allow for casual public use without encouraging heavy public use. SCAPOSD has indicated that they support this approach.

5. Undercrossing at Highway 12

There has been strong community interest in a formal trail under Highway 12 that would link the northern and southern portions of the Preserve.

Response

The City and multiple other entities (Laguna Foundation, Regional Parks) pursued this possibility with CalTrans during the bridge planning phase. Nonetheless, CalTrans did not provide for such a trail in their design. Prior to the bridge project, pedestrians did make that passage informally.

Recommendation

The Plan emphasizes the value to the community of trail access under Highway 12 at the Laguna, and recommends revisiting the possibility after bridge construction is complete and final conditions can be assessed. Access would likely be available only in dry weather/low water conditions. PCI recommends that access be on the west side of the channel. This would connect with the proposed AmeriCorps Trail extension, and it would avoid bringing additional human and dog presence into the relatively intact, undisturbed riparian habitat on the east side of the Laguna within Tomodachi. For direct access into Meadowlark, visitors could continue across the pedestrian walkway portion of the bridge, and then back down into Meadowlark Field. There is a swale that would also need to be crossed (typically wet through spring) before entering Meadowlark.

6. Himalayan Blackberry Management

A range of input has been received on Himalayan blackberry removal, with some advocating for or against herbicide use, for or against the use of goats to remove aboveground material, and for engaging campers to help remove blackberries after making blackberry preserves from the fruit. One speaker felt there was inadequate information about blackberry removal in the Plan. Some felt all Himalayan blackberry in Railroad Forest should be removed at once, rather than in phases as the Plan recommended.

Response

Herbicide use is not recommended in Plan based on City policy and the availability of viable alternatives (primarily, manual/mechanical removal, which is labor-intensive but can be successful if rootstock removal and follow-up are thorough). Use of goats is mentioned as a possible method of removal of aboveground material, with careful livestock management. Additional detail on blackberry removal methods has been added to the Plan.

Phasing of blackberry removal in Railroad Forest (and the essential related efforts that would accompany it, including replanting with natives and follow-up work) is recommended in order to: avoid denuding large areas at once, lessen impacts to wildlife, lessen erosion control concerns, spread out costs, and keep City maintenance tasks at a manageable level. Preference is given to restoring a smaller area thoroughly and well, rather than spreading resources thin and addressing a large area less effectively.

Recommendation

Team can add language noting that invasive species removal projects could include teaching cultural or food uses of some target plant species, such as making blackberry jam or pie, or creating basketry from ivy or Himalayan or thornless blackberry. Other items above are already addressed in the Plan and no additional changes are recommended.

7. Camping on the Preserve

The team has received extensive input from the community concerning unauthorized camping on the Preserve. Many people are concerned about the impact of campers on Preserve health, with littering and human and dog waste being major concerns. Many people noted that they don't use Preserve trails where campers may be nearby due to safety concerns. Some expressed concern over the presence of campers' dogs, which can pose a safety concern, as well as having ongoing impact on Preserve wildlife and water quality. Several people urged that regulations against camping be enforced more frequently. Several people expressed concern that campers be treated respectfully, and that homeless individuals be provided with options when asked to leave the Preserve. Several people suggested that campers be engaged in helping to clean up the Preserve.

Response

The plan calls for a number of measures to reduce the likelihood of camping on the Preserve, including greater City staff presence on the Preserve, with monthly visits to all trails, informal and formal; Himalayan blackberry removal and restoration with natives that allow greater visibility; and encouraging desired public uses of currently little-traveled trails including the AmeriCorps Trail. The Plan also recommends the re-installation of signage in Railroad Forest indicating that camping is prohibited, and providing the phone number to call to report camping to police.

City staff has noted that some campers are cooperative in removing their own trash, especially when provided with trash bags, which staff does periodically. Enforcement of no-camping regulations is handled by the Police Department (PD), which carries out full “sweeps” of campers in the Preserve roughly every two years, but interacts with many of the individuals more frequently. The PD also responds directly when complaints from the public are received. PCI interviewed PD staff for the plan development, and the team’s view is that the PD treats campers respectfully while enforcing the law, and does provide information on alternative resources for those in need. In addition to the monthly City staff presence on the Preserve, the Plan recommends full sweeps of the Preserve by the PD on a more frequent basis.

The Plan also encourages collaboration on this issue with adjacent landowners, to be more effective and to avoid simply pushing the campsites onto adjacent land.

All of these efforts will require additional focus and long-term effort by the City. The team acknowledges that, for those campers who have few or no other options, the issue of homelessness is a serious community concern that merits broader discussion and solutions that go far beyond the scope of this Management Plan.

Recommendation

The Plan addresses the points above; no further changes recommended.

From: **Kenyon Webster** kwebster@cityofsebastopol.org
Subject: Re: Laguna Preserve Management Plan
Date: November 10, 2015 at 7:55 AM
To: Mara Vejby mdvejby@archlocality.org
Cc: Prunuske Liza Liza@pcz.com



Ms. Vejby-

Yes, we concur that this idea would need more review and consultation. Thanks for your comments on this.

-Kenyon Webster

Kenyon Webster, Planning Director
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<http://ci.sebastopol.ca.us/>

On Nov 10, 2015, at 2:09 AM, Mara Vejby <mdvejby@archlocality.org> wrote:

Dear Kenyon,

I wanted to make a note in reference to comments that were made at the last city council meeting (and emails sent on the same subject) regarding 'native Pomo place names or relevant phrases' being included in the interpretive signage of the preserve. I've worked with native elders as an anthropologist/linguist on the documentation and preservation of the Pomoan language family.

While I'm sure the sentiment behind these suggestions are well-intentioned, I wanted to caution you that the language that was read out at the City Council Meeting (and may have been included in accompanying emails) is *not* the language that would have been spoken by the peoples originally living in this area. The language that was presented is actually Northern Pomo. There are seven distinct 'Pomo' languages belonging to seven different cultural groups, and Northern Pomo is traditionally spoken by peoples living north of Clear Lake. Within the Sebastopol area it is likely that Southern Pomo, or perhaps even Kashaya, would have been used.

Additionally, it would be very important to contact the appropriate elders and tribal councils before considering to use either Southern Pomo or Kashaya on any signage. Language is an especially carefully guarded (and *extremely* politicized) cultural resource, and many communities would not want their language used in this kind of a public setting, especially if it had been done without the blessing of the council and fluent elders.

As a side note:

'Pomo' is actually a name that was given to people of this region by the Russians and Spaniards who saw natives trading with, and treating as 'currency', white shell beads. The Kashaya referred to these beads as Po'oh. The mispronunciation of this word stuck and people who used these beads began to be called 'The Pomo' irrespective of their distinct cultures and languages.

I hope you find these comments useful (sorry it's a long note).

Thank you for *a#* the work you do!

Best,
-Mara Vejby-

On Mon, Nov 9, 2015 at 5:00 PM, Kenyon Webster <kwebster@cityofsebastopol.org> wrote:

At the December 15 City Council meeting, the Council will be picking up its discussion of the proposed Laguna de Santa Rosa Wetlands Preserve Management Plan. The Council heard some public testimony and began its review of the Plan at its November 3 meeting.

The Plan is intended to identify the Preserve's resources, needs, and issues, and help the City manage and improve this local gem.

Some of the issues under discussion involve balancing environmental goals with access and other potential improvements

The Plan can be reviewed on the City website at:
http://ci.sebastopol.ca.us/sites/default/files/jatkinson/draft_sebastopol_lwpmp_10.23.15.pdf

The staff report for the November 3 meeting can be accessed on the City meetings page at:
<http://ci.sebastopol.ca.us/page/meeting-dates-agendas-minutes-reports>

Additional public comment is welcome via email, or at the December 15 meeting. That meeting will begin at 6pm and will be at the Youth Annex, 425 Morris Street, Sebastopol.

-Kenyon Webster

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----- Original Message -----

Subject: Re: Laguna Preserve comments

Date: 2015-11-23 08:39

From: Geoffrey Skinner <skinnerbird@gmail.com>

To: Peter Schurch <redpencil@pacbell.net>

Hi Peter,

Yes, the east side is a beautiful area, but that's actually one of the main reasons it hasn't been proposed for a trail. That small portion of forest, along with a similar sized portion of the forest south of the Rodota Trail, is one of the only remaining examples of relatively untouched riparian forest along the entire length of the Laguna. The surprising openness and relative lack of Himalayan blackberry are no accident -- nearly every other part of the Laguna forest has been heavily impacted by ag and other uses, which has drastically changed its character by making it much less resistant to species that thrive in disturbed areas. By leaving the east side alone, that intact habitat provides us with a number of valuable functions, including support for a greater range of wildlife and a reference for what the west side could look like after restoration. Although it will take some time, the area the proposed connector trail traverses could look a lot more like the wonderful east side and a lot less like the seemingly impenetrable blackberry jungle it currently is. There are many lovely trees along the proposed route -- you just can't see the bottom 10 feet of their trunks!

Yes, there are some informal trails through the east side and yes, there is and has been human use essentially forever, but the relatively small number of people using them have much less impact on either the wildlife or plants than a full-scale formal trail. In addition, a not insignificant portion of a new formal trail would require boardwalks because much of the area is quite swampy much of a non-drought year.

Finally, a new trail wouldn't lead anywhere, unlike the connector trail proposed for the west side. That said, there aren't now any restrictions on people wandering in for bird watching or other activities, and unless the Council decides otherwise, no restrictions are being proposed.

I appreciate your thought about discouraging camping. So far the camping on the east side has been lighter than on the west. That might change with the proposed new trails and more active patrolling elsewhere -- it would be good to keep an eye on that. There is certainly a fair amount of camping elsewhere on the east side along the Rodota Trail and in the Fish & Wildlife lands to the south. Putting trails in to areas with camping and bringing a lot more people through is one approach -- definitely one of the rationales behind the Americorps maintenance and the extension to Hwy 12, but I don't think it needs to be the only approach. I think the swampiness of the east side has prevented the camping to be as intensive as other areas in the Preserve.

I've used Tomdachi for kayak access during high water and could imagine a low-impact, non-commercial launch area at the bridge, or at least informal access (with kayakers carrying their boats to the put-in area).

Depending on how Caltrans completes the work on the north side, the navigable stretch could extend to the Zimpher Creek confluence. By my measurements, that whole piece would be slightly less than 2/3 of a mile.

It wouldn't really that long a paddle, but it does work. The City would still need to pursue some agreements and permits from both the Open Space District and the North Bay Regional Water Quality Board to clear and maintain a water trail.

Geoffrey

Geoffrey Skinner

Librarian By

Day skinnerbird@gmail.com • <http://socolife.wordpress.com> [3]

On Sun, Nov 22, 2015 at 9:10 PM, Peter Schurch <redpencil@pacbell.net> wrote:

Hi Geoffrey

I've been exploring the Tomodachi Park strip east of the Laguna and don't understand why the east side hasn't been chosen for a trail. It is beautiful, open and has trails already through it up to the Joe Rodota Trail. I think the west side of the Laguna is more difficult for a trail because it is more densely vegetated. Do you know any reason the planners chose the west side rather than the east side for a trail?

Also I think a kayak put-in along the CalTrans bridge would be as simple as allowing access. CalTrans already built a dirt road there along the south side of the bridge. The City just has to not fence it off. A few small log jams could be removed and then you could float from the Highway bridge to the Joe Rodota bridge at any time of year. That would be a beautiful spot for kayakers to use. I don't think there would be any impact on wildlife habitat at all.

What do you think? See my description below and email me if you want to see some photos.

Peter

Hi Creek Stewards and Friends,

I've been spending some hours wandering through Tomodachi Park and wading up the adjoining Creek. I explored the Creek and east side of the Park and was amazed at how beautiful it is. The trees are open and park like, there are no Blackberries and there are informal trails throughout it. It's one of the best kept secrets in Sebastopol. I took lots of photos and put them in a Dropbox. If you email me I can invite you to my Laguna dropbox and you can see for yourself how beautiful it is. Or take a walk out there. It's easy to access from the east side of the new CalTrans bridge. Just follow the trails into the forest.

I think it would be a great improvement to the Park to make a foot trail or at least allow volunteers to make a trail through there. The East side is better than the West side of the Creek where a trail is proposed. We would just have to make slight improvements to the trails that already are there.

Homeless camps were there of course but none were occupied this week. I think more public usage of the area would discourage camping there. That would be good for habitat too. It would give the City a whole new beautiful natural area for birdwatchers and kids to explore from the CalTrans Bridge to the Joe Rodota Trail.

The argument doesn't make sense to me that access should be restricted in order for habitat to survive. The area definitely has human use already. And it had intensive human use for thousands of years. That's not going to change. But the quality of human use can be improved if environmentalists and volunteers are encouraged reclaim the area.

The Creek is very navigable to the South of the CalTrans bridge. I would very much advocate for non-commercial kayakers to be able to use Tomodachi Park for boating access. It would be a lovely half mile float to the Joe Rodota Bridge and back. Just a few logs would need

float to the Joe Hobbs Bridge and back. Just a few logs would need to be removed to make that possible. There wouldn't be any impaired habitat in my opinion.

Let me know if you want to see the photos.

Peter (with waders on)

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*Geoffrey Skinner
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Dec. 9, 2015*

Dear City Council members:

Thank you for addressing the future of our small, but important, part of the Laguna watershed. I wish to comment on a number of aspects of the plan and surrounding discussion, especially comments made at the previous Council meeting, at the Planning Commission meeting and through separate email forums.

Kind regards,
Geoffrey

Laguna Preserve Management Plan Comments

Wildlife and people

A few people have questioned whether more trails in the Preserve would be bad for wildlife. Some species -- such as raccoon, opossum, fox squirrels, and turkeys -- thrive near humans. But many species do not. In the past few weeks, I've twice encountered a grey fox while cycling home on the Rodota Trail after dark, when no one else was on the trail. It appears to live in or near the east side of Tomodachi. Both times, the fox slipped down into the trees as I approached.

The fox and its people- (and dog-) shy neighbors are a big reason why it's important to keep some areas such as the east side of Tomodachi (across the channel) and portions of RR Forest relatively free of visitors. The small piece of Tomodachi is one of the best pieces of riparian habitat in the area. While the small, forested strip on the western edge of Meadowlark is fair -- I encountered bobcat, coyote and river otters there last summer on early morning visits -- there just isn't that much really good habitat downstream of Tomodachi to well south of Occidental Road and the area just upstream of the Rodota Trail is fairly small. Good habitat is precious!

Public Access

Some speakers at the previous Council meeting and in other forums described the Plan as reducing or restricting public access. Based on my reading of the plan, I disagree and point to how the Plan provides new trails, better visibility, better interpretive opportunities and more ways for the community to become involved with stewarding the preserve. The actual focus of the discussions has really been around access to Railroad Forest and lower Calder Creek, rather

than about overall access -- yet I haven't heard anyone actually state that. For the Preserve as a whole, the public has easy access to almost all of it. There are 4 miles of existing and proposed trails in the Preserve. With the exception of the Railroad Forest Trail and pathways within the Youth Park, all have natural or non-paved surfaces, including the proposed Americorps extension and Tomodachi connector trails. Although the City wouldn't want to encourage establishing new informal trails or more heavily using established ones, nothing in the Master Plan or proposed Management Plan prohibit people from wandering off-path.

The Plan calls for many changes that will also increase public access in a variety of ways, including:

- Restoring native habitat in Railroad Forest will increase access for viewing wildlife and increase the perception of safety by opening up the understory, as well as informal access to lower Calder Creek between the culvert and the Rodota Trail bridge
- Eliminating camping throughout the Preserve will make it more comfortable for the public to visit
- New trails will make it easier to visit all parts of the Preserve by increasing access to Tomodachi and Americorps -- and increasing overall connectivity
- Better maintenance will make trails easier to use and more inviting
- Engaging the public through education and volunteerism will help them understand and enjoy the Preserve
- The Hwy 12 bridge will offer the opportunity to create winter/spring access to Meadowlark Field, particularly in conjunction with the new connectors

The challenge is to balance the passive recreational uses with habitat and wildlife protection. In some parts of the preserve, the recreational uses are more important than in other areas, but the wildlife needs places shared with fewer humans (and their dogs) if we value wildness at our doorstep.

Kayak Access

Formal kayak access at Tomodachi seems highly questionable, although informal access near the bridge seems possible, especially during high water. The entire potentially navigable distance between the Zimpher Creek confluence and the Rodota Trail is, however, roughly only 0.23 mile -- a pretty short paddle. And as others have pointed out, a number of willow branches and trunks currently obstruct clear passage along this short stretch. This living and dead wood in the creek is part of healthy riparian habitat. Those willows currently in or close to the water serve important functions as shade and hiding places for fish and -- for the branches actually in the water -- as frequent sunning places for western pond turtle, which is a Calif. Dept. of Fish & Wildlife (CDFW) Species of Special Concern. They are also used by herons and egrets.

If -- despite these issues -- the City does wish to pursue creating and maintaining a water trail in this stretch, they would still need to pursue agreements and permits from the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (SCAPOS), CDFW and the North Coast Regional Water Quality Control Board (North Coast RWQCB), since without annual maintenance, willows will continue to be a barrier to paddling this short stretch..

Informal access downstream at the Youth Park is also a possibility, although the navigable distance is even shorter. The willows downstream of the Youth Park -- the main barrier between the Preserve and the Occidental Road access --are outside of the City's control. Encouraging paddlers to use the Occidental Road access seems like a better overall solution for now.

Tomodachi Trails Development

Some individuals have suggested additional trails on the east side of the Laguna channel in Tomodachi. I strongly disagree and urge the Council to maintain the Plan guidelines to keep that area undeveloped. Yes, the east side is a beautiful area, but that's actually one of the main reasons it hasn't been proposed for a trail. That small portion of forest, along with a similar sized portion of the forest south of the Rodota Trail, is one of the only remaining examples of relatively untouched riparian forest along the entire length of the Laguna. The surprising openness and relative lack of Himalayan blackberry are no accident. Nearly every other part of the Laguna forest has been heavily impacted by agriculture and other uses. These disturbances have drastically changed most of the Laguna's riparian forests by removing native diversity and leaving disturbed ground where invasive species thrive. By leaving the east side alone, that intact habitat provides a number of valuable functions, including support for a greater range of wildlife and a reference for what the west side could look like after restoration. Although it will take some time, the area the proposed west-side connector trail traverses could look a lot more like the wonderful east side and a lot less like the seemingly impenetrable blackberry jungle it currently is. There are many lovely trees along the proposed route -- you just can't see the bottom 10 feet of their trunks right now due to the blackberry!

An informal trail does already exist on the east side and yes, there is and has been human use there-- and throughout the Laguna region -- essentially forever, but the relatively small number of people using the east side have had much less impact on either the wildlife or plants than would many people (and dogs) on a full-scale formal trail. In addition, a new formal trail would require boardwalks because a large portion of the area is quite swampy throughout much of a non-drought year. Finally, a new trail on the east side wouldn't lead anywhere, unlike the connector trail proposed for the west side. That said, there aren't now any restrictions on people wandering in for bird watching or other activities, and, unless the Council decides otherwise, no restrictions are being proposed.

Camping

While compassion for homeless people who camp in the Preserve is a good thing, camping and campers contributes to many of the problems in the Preserve and in waterways -- from helping create a perception of the Preserve as a dangerous place to disturbing wildlife to large amounts of trash and human waste entering the Laguna. Regular visits by City staff and police will help, as will more visitors on an improved Americorps Trail. Increasing pedestrian use of existing trails is one strategy the plan uses to discourage camping.

Camping in some areas, such as the east side of Tomodachi and the western edge of Meadowlark, has been lighter than in RR Forest and Americorps. That might change with the proposed new trails and more active patrolling elsewhere -- it would be good to keep an eye on those areas.

Himalayan Blackberry Removal

I urge the Council to adopt the phased approach, rather than trying to do everything at once. The rationale for this is addressed very specifically on page 51 in the Plan:

Working in one quadrant (north or south of Calder Ck, and east or west of paved trail) at a time, remove Himalayan blackberry, acacia, and other invasives and replace with competitive, diverse native riparian tree, shrub, and herbaceous species. Begin with southwest quadrant and monitor outcomes; use lessons learned to inform subsequent work. Identify and protect native species from disturbance by removal work as much as possible. Select species that provide habitat diversity as well as maintain views of passers-by into habitat.

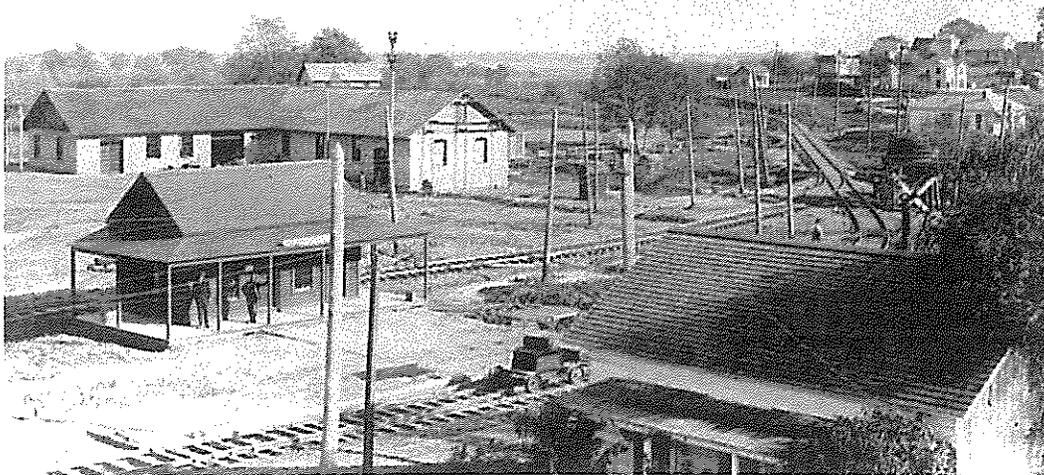
Even if the blackberries provide poor habitat compared to a diverse native understory, they do provide *some* habitat and by taking a more gradual approach, we don't end up with a large denuded area stripped of all understory habitat. In addition, we need to take care in an area that has a variety of cultural and historical artifacts.

I also wish to point out that the Plan also call out areas of infestation in the other parts of the preserve. Restoration efforts in Railroad Forest will also inform efforts elsewhere.

Calder Creek Channel Alterations

Lynn Deedler has lobbied for reshaping the Calder Creek channel in Railroad Forest. The plan does not call for extensive grading of the creek channel for good reasons. The pre-agriculture and pre-railroad lower Calder Creek was likely more of a diffuse and braided channel (some of this is still evident to the north of the current channel). Recreating the pre-disturbance form in this

location would be very difficult due to the adjacent trails and bridge. Even in its altered form, the creek mostly functions well. Modifying the banks would be an expensive, involved project with questionable purpose. Over time, the creek will likely shift on its own, as it has in the past.



Petaluma & Santa Rosa RR depot and powerhouse in 1904 -- with the once and future Railroad Forest in the distance. Prior to increased development of packing houses, railroad spurs and other fruit industry infrastructure, the western half of what is now Railroad Forest was a vineyard, supplying the Sebastopol Winery on Santa Rosa (Sebastopol) Avenue. (SCL Photo 18695 -- courtesy of Sonoma County Library)

The segment of the creek with the steepest banks is the one closest to the culvert behind the Postal Annex. It could only be modified on the south bank because there isn't room on the north side. Downstream of that, the big sediment load deposited each year is doing a pretty good job of reducing the distance between the creek surface and the top of the banks. Modifying the channel around the bridge might have detrimental effects on the bridge and trail if it makes the area wetter. Just a short distance east of the bridge (maybe 30 feet or so), the creek isn't particularly incised and especially past the homeless encampment area, doesn't need help.

Laguna Bank Modifications at Tomodachi

There have been suggestions about modifying the western bank of the Laguna under the oaks at Tomodachi to make access to the water easier. The bank was built up with debris at some point - perhaps at the same time a cap of imported materials went down over the camping area. My

only hesitation there are the mature Valley oaks that would be disturbed. Care would be needed in changing the topography.

Plan Timing, Impetus and Context

Although the blackberry clearing in Railroad Forest and subsequent penalties from the North Coast RWQCB may have influenced the timing for the Plan, the conditions of purchase and conservation easements for Railroad Forest and Tomodachi specifically required development of management plans. Thanks to the Council, the proposed plan encompasses all five parcels of the Preserve and allows us to see them as an interconnected whole.

A few speakers have made disparaging remarks about real and alleged SCAPOSD restrictions on RR Forest and Tomodachi (Meadowlark also has an easement, but that hasn't been a topic of discussion). I think we need to remember that the City would not own these properties without SCAPOSD help -- and ultimately without help from all Sonoma County taxpayers. The City should respect its agreement to protect natural resources.

Funding

The cost for implementing all the actions in Plan is not cheap, and ongoing maintenance costs will be significant, but the City and partners are already pursuing funding for a significant portion of the initial costs. The plan identifies additional possible funding sources. If they are successful -- the projects are very grant-fundable -- the direct cost to the City will be much, much less.