

**Open Space and Habitat Commission Minutes**  
**Monday, October 7, 2019**  
**Community Chambers Conference Room, 23 Russell Boulevard, 6:30 p.m.**

Commissioners Present: Stephanie Holstege, Patrick Huber (Chair), Joy Klineberg, Roberta Millstein, Carrie Shaw (Vice Chair), Marc Vayssieres, Garrett Allen (Alternate)

Vacant Positions: None

Commissioners Absent: Erin Gooch

Assigned Staff: Tracie Reynolds, Manager, Open Space Program

Council Liaison: Will Arnold (Regular), Lucas Frerichs (Alternate)

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**1. Call to Order & Roll Call**

Commissioner Huber opened the meeting after a quorum was achieved.

**2. Approval of Agenda**

On a motion by Commissioner Allen, seconded by Commissioner Millstein, the Commission voted 7-0-1-0 to approve the October 2019 agenda. (Ayes – Allen, Holstege, Huber, Klineberg, Millstein, Shaw, Vayssieres; Noes – none; Absent – Gooch; Abstentions – none).

**3. Brief Announcements from Staff, Commissioners, and City Council Liaisons**

Tracie Reynolds, staff to the Commission, gave the Commission a brief update on two current open space projects: (1) the habitat restoration project on three acres at the intersection of F Street and Anderson Road, now called the North Davis Upland Habitat Area, and (2) the public accessibility improvements project at South Fork Preserve. She also mentioned upcoming opportunities for volunteers to help build the new trails at the North Davis Upland Habitat Area.

**4. Public Comment**

There was no public comment.

**5. Consent Calendar**

There were two items on the consent calendar: approval of the June 1, 2019 special meeting minutes and approval of the June 3, 2019 regular meeting minutes. On a motion by Commissioner Millstein, seconded by Commissioner Vayssieres, the Commission voted 7-0-1-0 to approve the June 1, 2019 special meeting minutes and the June 3, 2019 regular meeting minutes. (Ayes – Allen, Holstege, Huber, Klineberg, Millstein, Shaw, Vayssieres; Noes – none; Absent – Gooch; Abstentions – None).

**6. Regular Items**

**Action Item -- Recommend that the City Council authorize staff to negotiate a possible agricultural conservation easement with the owner of 118 acres of farmland less than a mile from the city limits, northeast of the Wildhorse residential development (APN 042-120-022)**

Ms. Reynolds gave the Commission a brief summary of the preliminary acquisition report that she prepared for this item. The report provided the Commission with information about a 118-acre parcel of farmland located less than a mile from the city limits, northeast of the Wildhorse residential development. It is owned by the Gill Family Trust who recently planted it with walnut and pistachio trees. Most of the western edge and all of the northern edge of the site abuts the Covell drainage channel (Channel A), which runs along Covell Boulevard in west Davis, under Highway 113, through North Davis and the Wildhorse golf course, and out to the Willow Slough bypass. The property is a candidate for an agricultural conservation easement. The report described the property, its physical characteristics and improvements, and its relationship to the City's open space acquisition priorities and programmatic goals.

In sum, Ms. Reynolds stated that the arguments in favor of pursuing this transaction include: (1) the property is well within a mile of the City and is already connected to the City's Wildhorse agricultural buffer by an unofficial footpath along the City's drainage channel, (2) the property primarily consists of prime agricultural land, (3) the property is

surrounded on two sides by a major City drainage channel that could provide rare public access and habitat restoration opportunities called for in the City's Strategic Plan for the Open Space Program, (4) the property's location and characteristics satisfy multiple priority acquisition criteria, and (5) the property's size and soils support farming.

She said the arguments against pursuing this transaction include: (1) the property is landlocked at this time so development pressure is only low/moderate despite its proximity to the city limits, (2) the property is planted with nut trees which do not have high habitat value, and (3) the landowner may not provide the City with a public access easement.

She recommended beginning formal negotiations with the property owner over the terms of an agricultural conservation easement, including a possible public access easement along a portion of the property that would allow the public to officially and legally walk along the Covell drainage channel (Channel A).

A representative for the property owner, Mr. Amar Gill, said he was also purchasing 35 acres to the north of his property and these acres could be added to the agricultural conservation easement.

After some discussion, Commissioner Millstein made the following motion: "The Commission recommends that the City Council authorize staff to negotiate a possible agricultural conservation easement with the property owner of farmland less than a mile from the city limits, northeast of the Wildhorse residential development, and (1) these negotiations should occur regardless of whether the property is 118 acres or 153 acres, and (2) staff should also pursue a public access easement along Channel A."

Commissioner Vayssieres seconded the above motion. The Commission voted 7-0-1-0 to approve the above motion. (Ayes – Allen, Holstege, Huber, Klineberg, Millstein, Shaw, Vayssieres; Noes – none; Absent – Gooch; Abstentions – None).

**Discussion Item -- Discuss the City's land management practices related to certain milkweed plants that were planted in the North Davis channel**

There was one member of the public who spoke on this item. He said that a "Friends of North Davis Channel" was forming and that he hoped that group could participate in discussions about the future management of this area. He also asked the Commission to consider including the North Davis channel in the City's portfolio of open space lands.

Ms. Reynolds then gave the Commission a brief summary of the staff report that she prepared for this item. The staff report provided the Commission with more details about the grant-funded habitat enhancement project along the North Davis channel, a U.C. Davis monarch butterfly research project, and the City's land management plan for 50 milkweed plants that were planted by a U.C. Davis associate professor in a problematic location.

At the Commission's June 2019 meeting, two North Davis residents -- Larry Snyder and Mark Woerner -- spoke during public comment about the City's land management practices along the channel. The City's Public Works (Utilities & Operations) Department maintains the channel. They expressed dismay that the City had started mowing down some of the 50 milkweed plants as part of the City's efforts to reduce fire fuel along the channel. The mowing does not kill the plants, but it prevents them from flowering in the summer when the monarch butterflies need the blooms for food and breeding purposes. They said the 50 at-risk milkweed plants (located between Bird Entry Park and Mockingbird Place where the channel turns left) provide marvelous habitat and should not be mowed in the spring. They said they would like a consistent policy from the City to preserve as many of the 50 milkweed plants as possible.

For its part, the City maintains that the 50 milkweed plants were planted in an area (in the base of the channel at the bottom of a steep slope) that is difficult for the City to mow without running over some of the plants. The City Fire Marshal's prescription for this area requires the City to mow it multiple times a year to reduce the risk of wildfire. Because a row of eucalyptus trees is located at the top of this slope, some North Davis residents are very worried about the potential of a fire spreading to the adjacent residential neighborhood. This is a concern shared by the Davis Fire Department. In fact, several City departments work closely and consistently together to properly maintain the channel (i.e., Fire, Public Works, Parks, Open Space, and Urban Forestry).

In an effort to balance the City's need to reduce fire fuel with the community's desire for monarch butterfly habitat, City staff proposed the following solution that is doable given the City's limited resources: (1) the City will make good-faith efforts to avoid the 50 existing plants, and (2) the City will plant 75 additional milkweed plants in a more suitable area of the channel. She noted that this solution also involves a recognition on the community's part that some milkweed plants might occasionally be mowed down.

After some discussion, Commissioner Shaw made the following motion: "The Commission supports staff's continuing interdepartmental cooperation and collaboration related to managing the habitat in the channel and the Commission supports staff's proposed solution for the milkweed plants."

Commissioner Holstege seconded the above motion. The Commission voted 7-0-1-0 to approve the above motion. (Ayes – Allen, Holstege, Huber, Klineberg, Millstein, Shaw, Vayssieres; Noes – none; Absent – Gooch; Abstentions – None).

## **7. Commission and Staff Communications**

### **Commission Work Plan**

The Commission discussed working on its five-year implementation plan. Commission working groups agreed to meet in coming weeks to discuss which projects each working group would like to focus on over the next five years. Working groups may generate their own projects or choose action items from the Strategic Plan for the Open Space Program.

### **Upcoming Meeting Date, Time, Items**

The Commission's next meeting is November 4. Possible agenda items discussed include (1) a discussion of the open space and habitat elements of the Aggie Research Campus development proposal, and (2) a discussion about interpretive panel ideas for South Fork Preserve.

### **Upcoming Events**

Ms. Reynolds mentioned upcoming opportunities for volunteers to help build the new trails at the North Davis Upland Habitat Area. She said she would email the Commission the exact dates and times for these volunteer events.

### **Working Groups**

1. *Acquisitions*. No updates were reported.
2. *Habitat Restoration and Enhancement*. The working group reported that it met over the summer with the City's Open Space Land Manager, Chris Gardner, to discuss habitat improvements (i.e., hedgerows) at the former Howat Ranch property, which the City owns. The working group decided to wait to pursue this project further until the City's partner, the Yolo County Resource Conservation District, had completed a carbon plan for the property.
3. *Land and Resource Management*. No updates were reported.
4. *Public Access and Recreation*. No updates were reported.
5. *Financial and Program Accountability*. No updates were reported.
6. *Public Engagement and Partnerships*. No updates were reported.

## **8. Adjourn**

The meeting was adjourned at approximately 8:25 p.m.