

Open Space and Habitat Commission Minutes
Monday, November 4, 2024
Community Chambers Conference Room, 23 Russell Boulevard, 6:30 p.m.

Commissioners Present: Ramiro Cabanillas-Ledesma, Lindsay Correa, Sara Geonczy, Steve Greco, Christina Harrington, Patrick Huber (Chair), and Marc Vayssieres (Vice Chair)

Vacant Positions: None

Commissioners Absent: *Christopher Alberts (Alternate)*

Assigned Staff: Tracie Reynolds, Open Space Program Manager

Council Liaison: Josh Chapman (Regular), *Bapu Vaitla (Alternate)*

1. Call to Order & Roll Call

Commissioner Huber opened the meeting after a quorum was achieved and took roll call. Commissioners Correa and Greco arrived during Item #5, Consent Calendar.

2. Approval of Agenda

Commissioner Vayssieres made a motion to approve the agenda. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Cabanillas-Ledesma. The Commission voted 5-0-2-0 to approve the motion (Ayes – Cabanillas-Ledesma, Geonczy, Harrington, Huber, Vayssieres; Noes – None; Absent – Correa, Greco; Abstentions – None).

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

Ms. Reynolds, staff to the Commission, updated the Commission on a prescribed burn that she said she hoped would take place sometime later this week at South Fork Preserve.

4. Public Comment

There was no public comment.

5. Consent Calendar

On consent was the approval of the October 2024 meeting minutes. Commissioner Cabanillas-Ledesma made a motion to approve the minutes. It was seconded by Commissioner Vayssieres. The Commission voted 7-0-0-0 to approve the motion (Ayes – Cabanillas-Ledesma, Correa, Geonczy, Greco, Harrington, Huber, Vayssieres; Noes – None; Absent – None; Abstentions – None).

6. Regular Items

Action Item – Receive preliminary acquisition report about a potential land acquisition along the South Fork of Putah Creek, between the levees west of South Fork Preserve, owned by HM Clause and the William Schoeningh Trust (portions of APNs 0110-060-080 and 0110-120-010)

Ms. Reynolds summarized the information contained in the preliminary acquisition report. She said this possible acquisition involved buying about 130 acres of land along the South Fork of Putah Creek that are owned by two different owners, HM Clause Inc. and the William A. Schoeningh Trust. About 110 of the 130 acres are planted in row crops and the remaining acres are part of the creek's riparian habitat, she said. The acres are part of larger parcels, so this possible acquisition would involve two different lot line adjustments to separate the 130 acres from the two existing parcels, she said.

She said this area is noted in the Solano Multispecies Habitat Conservation Plan (“Solano HCP”) for its major riparian vegetation stands and its habitat for Chinook salmon and steelhead. It is a priority acquisition area, and an area singled out for restoration, under the Solano HCP because it contains multiple conservation elements, such as riparian vegetation, covered species occurrences, watershed integrity and water quality, she said. The primary conservation action for these areas under the Solano HCP is to restore and expand the riparian habitat, she said, since most of the riparian forest along Putah Creek has been wiped out over the last 200 years. In the long-term, the entire 130-acre property could be restored to riparian, upland, and oak/savannah habitats, she said. She asked the Commission to recommend to the City Council that staff pursue these acquisitions and formally begin negotiations with the property owners of these two properties.

Commissioner Huber then asked if Commissioners had any clarifying questions. The Commission asked for clarification on (1) the status of the Solano HCP and whether it was in effect, (2) whether purchasing this property would require the hiring of additional open space staff, and (3) whether sufficient open space funds were available to purchase these properties. Commissioner Huber then took public comment. There was no public comment. Commissioner Huber then closed public comment and the Commission discussed this item. The Commission encouraged staff to reach out to Solano County, in particular the implementing agency for the Solano HCP and the Solano County Water Agency, to see if there were any partnership opportunities available to help finance this purchase and the habitat restoration.

Commissioner Greco then made the following motion: *“The Open Space and Habitat Commission recommends formal negotiations with the property owners over the terms of a fee title acquisition of the 130 acres adjacent to South Fork Preserve.”* Commissioner Cabanillas-Ledesma seconded the motion. The Commission voted 7-0-0-0 to approve the motion (Ayes – Cabanillas-Ledesma, Correa, Geonczy, Greco, Harrington, Huber, Vayssieres; Noes – None; Absent – None; Abstentions – None).

Action Item – Receive preliminary acquisition report about a potential agricultural conservation easement on 120 acres located near the intersection of County Roads 104A and 30, owned by the Gill Family Trust (APNs 033-650-003 and 042-130-003)

Ms. Reynolds said that this possible acquisition of a conservation easement was on hold at the moment. She recommended that the Commission table this item until it is ready for further discussion. Commissioner Harrington made a motion to table this item until it is ready for further discussion. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Huber. The Commission voted 7-0-0-0 to approve the motion (Ayes – Cabanillas-Ledesma, Correa, Geonczy, Greco, Harrington, Huber, Vayssieres; Noes – None; Absent – None; Abstentions – None).

Discussion Item – Receive staff report and discuss final draft design for a wetlands habitat restoration project the City is working on with UC Davis on 34 acres of UC Davis land on Old Davis Road

Ms. Reynolds summarized the information contained in the staff report. She said staff from the City and UC Davis have been working with an outside consultant for months to develop a final design concept for this wetlands habitat restoration. The outside consultant (“ICF”) has met several times with a science advisory group organized by UC Davis to gather input on appropriate habitat types, she said. Based on this information, ICF developed three draft design concepts that the Commission discussed in February, she said. Additional feedback was gathered at two community events in Davis and UC Davis in March and April, she said. ICF has spent the last several months perfecting the final design concept based on the feedback it received at these community meetings, she said.

She said key take-aways from the community meetings were (1) a preference for reserving some of the site for habitat and prohibiting public trails in that protected area, (2) a preference for providing as much open water area as possible, (3) a preference for a pedestrian bridge over the creek, despite the cost, and a preference that it be located as far from the road as possible, and (4) a preference for a fishing pier, a boat/kayak launch, boardwalks, and observation decks. She said City staff and UC Davis staff also told ICF that maintenance costs were a concern and that the improvements should be designed to minimize maintenance costs as much as possible. For example, she said the vault toilet was eliminated and replaced with a portable toilet wrapped in vegetation to prevent graffiti. Also, site signage would be limited, made of black metal, and feature cut-out words to thwart vandalism, minimize graffiti, and simplify the restorative work, she said. Finally, she said interpretive signage would be temporary and provided by UC Davis students as part of classwork. She said staff is seeking the Commission's feedback on the final design concept so that construction drawings can be finalized for the eventual grant application that will help fund the construction of this project.

Commissioner Huber then asked if Commissioners had any clarifying questions. The Commission asked for clarification on (1) certain design elements and (2) how the site would be maintained. Commissioner Huber then took public comment. There was no public comment. Commissioner Huber then closed public comment and the Commission discussed this item. The Commission recommended that the final design concept include (1) bike parking, (2) additional signage to make sure visitors are aware that bicycles are not allowed on the site and that no people are allowed in the sensitive habitat areas, and (3) a mixture of live oaks and valley oaks in the "native oak allee" feature, because live oaks grow faster than valley oaks and will provide shade faster than valley oaks will. There was also some discussion about whether bus parking should be provided and whether a gate should be on the levee maintenance road. Ms. Reynolds said she would pass on this feedback to ICF and UC Davis. No action was taken.

7. Subcommittee and Liaison Assignment Updates

A. Liaison Assignments

(1) *Lower Putah Creek Coordinating Committee ("LPCCC")*. Commissioner Huber updated the Commission on the new temporary removable wooden fish ladder at the check dam to help salmon get past the check dam and enter the creek. He said fish are currently using it and it is exciting to see. He said the installation of the fish ladder is the first successful effort to deal with the problem of salmon getting stuck at the check dam.

(2) *Yolo Habitat Conservancy ("YHC")*. Commissioner Huber said there was nothing to report from the YHC's implementation committee.

8. Long Range Calendar: Upcoming Meeting Dates and/or Potential Agenda Items

The next regularly scheduled meeting is Monday, December 2, 2024. Possible agenda items discussed included (1) a discussion about the Open Space Program budget, (2) a discussion about outstanding action items in the Open Space Program Strategic Plan, and (3) a discussion about recent research into ownership/management options for the Davis wetlands. Ms. Reynolds also mentioned that the General Plan update might be discussed at the City Council on November 12. Commissioner Huber also said that he was pleased to see that a more ecologically preferable development proposal from Village Farms might be discussed at the City Council on November 19.

9. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at approximately 8:16 p.m.