

Open Space and Habitat Commission Minutes
Monday, May 5, 2025
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), Marc Vayssieres (Vice Chair) and *Christopher Alberts (Alternate)*

Vacant Positions: None

Commissioners Absent: None

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. Commissioner Correa arrived during Item 3 (Brief Announcements).

2. Approval of Agenda

Commissioner Vayssieres made a motion to approve the agenda. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Greco. The Commission voted 6-0-1-0 to approve the motion (Ayes – Cabanillas-Ledesma, Geonczy, Greco, Harrington, Huber, Vayssieres; Noes – None; Absent – Correa; Abstentions – None).

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

Ms. Reynolds, staff to the Commission, said the Commission may be asked to hold a meeting in July or August, the Commission's typical recess months, to discuss the open space and habitat features of the Village Farms Davis development proposal.

4. Public Comment

There was no public comment.

5. Consent Calendar

On consent was the approval of the April 2025 meeting minutes. Commissioner Geonczy made a motion to approve the draft minutes. It was seconded by Commissioner Vayssieres. The Commission voted 6-0-0-1 to approve the draft minutes (Ayes – Cabanillas-Ledesma, Geonczy, Greco, Harrington, Huber, Vayssieres; Noes – None; Absent – None; Abstentions – Correa).

6. Regular Items

Action Item -- Elect new chair and vice chair for 2025

Commissioner Huber said that he had applied to the City to extend his term on the Commission, even though he was termed out. He said he was optimistic that his request would be approved by the full City Council. He said that he was willing to continue serving as chair of the Commission if no one else wanted to do it. Commissioner Alberts said he was also interested in serving as chair or vice chair, once his status on the Commission was upgraded to a regular position. After some discussion, Commissioner Cabanillas-Ledesma made a motion to nominate Commissioner Huber as chair and Commissioner Alberts as vice chair. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Vayssieres. The motion passed by a vote of 7-0-0-0 (Ayes – Cabanillas-Ledesma, Correa, Geonczy, Greco,

Harrington, Huber, Vayssieres; Noes – None; Absent – None; Abstentions – None). Commissioner Huber then made a motion to have Commissioner Vayssieres continue serving as vice chair for one more month until Commissioner Alberts became a regular Commissioner, which was expected in June. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Harrington. The motion passed by a vote of 7-0-0 (Ayes – Cabanillas-Ledesma, Correa, Geonczy, Greco, Harrington, Huber, Vayssieres; Noes – None; Absent – None; Abstentions – None).

Action Item – Discuss the possible creation of a commission-initiated task about the open space conservation easement held by the City of Davis on the privately owned Wildhorse golf course

Ms. Reynolds, staff to the Commission, explained that this item was a Commission-initiated task and the agenda item for tonight was for the Commission as a whole to discuss and determine what task, if any, the Commission wanted to place on a future agenda on this topic. She said this was the next step in the new City Council-approved standardized process for commissions to place commission-initiated items on their agendas. She explained that if the Commission decided that it wanted to take an action or make a recommendation on this matter, or have City staff spend significant time working on this matter, then staff would be required to get the City Council's approval first. Commissioner Huber then took public comment.

- Eileen Samitz, a Davis resident, said she was one of the neighborhood representatives involved in the planning of the Wildhorse residential development. She said the community wanted a habitat-friendly design and that the golf course was designed using Audubon principles. She said that City staff at the time said a conservation easement was the best way to keep the golf course as open space. She said the conservation easement is in perpetuity and that overturning it would set a precedent for other conservation easements. She said the current owner bought the golf course in 2017 and then within a year and a half he proposed condominiums. Then later he proposed a larger project, she said. She said the City needs to just say no to any future development proposal on the golf course.
- Sharon Montooth, a Davis resident, said she enjoys walking in nature around the golf course. She said her main concern is that the open space conservation easement was voted on by Davis voters in 1995 as a promise, and that it was supposed to be in perpetuity, and she is concerned about the precedent that would be set if that promise was reneged on.
- Karen Shaw, a Davis resident, said she is an avid golfer and the Wildhorse golf course is the only public 18-hole championship golf course in Davis. She advocated for the support of the conservation easement on the 165-acre golf course. She noted that the property owner has submitted two separate development proposals on portions of the golf course and that she expects the owner to submit a third development proposal. She said the golf course is operating in the black and that other buyers are interested in buying the golf course to operate it as a golf course, but the owner has passed on these opportunities. She said the owner still believes the golf course is a logical place for housing. She noted that the Wildhorse development agreement required a conservation easement on the golf course and was approved by Davis voters in 1995. She also noted that a conservation easement includes stronger protections than the Williamson Act.
- Russ Townsley, a Davis resident, said he would like to see the conservation easement on the golf course be a Commission-initiated task at the Commission's June meeting. He said this

easement prohibits urban development in perpetuity and was to be permanent, even if the golf course failed. He said this easement was approved by voters in 1995 and any effort to overturn it would be a serious violation of trust. He said overturning the easement would set a terrible precedent with repercussions all over California. He said if a developer could undo this easement, developers all over the state would be incentivized to undo other easements. He said Davis should remember the role it has historically played in open space conservation.

- Gayle Barry, a resident of the Wildhorse neighborhood, said permanent conservation easements are a matter of legal and public trust, and that the intent of this conservation easement and the promise to Davis citizens was clearly to keep this particular parcel as open space. She also said that this conservation easement is unique because it protects wildlife habitat on the golf course and provides a valuable wildlife corridor linking surrounding properties like the Wildhorse agricultural buffer. She urged the Commission to support this open space area and this conservation easement, and requested that this topic be a Commission-initiated task for the Commission's June meeting.
- Marjorie Longo, a resident of the Wildhorse neighborhood, said there is a pattern of requests from the property owner to remove land from this conservation easement. She said the City should never extinguish a conservation easement, and doing so would set a dangerous precedent. She said the citizens of Davis were promised that this conservation easement would be upheld in perpetuity, and the City needs to keep that promise. In addition, she said the conservation easement was approved by voters in 1995 as part of a vote to approve the Wildhorse development agreement. She said all development proposals on the conservation easement land should be rejected. She asked the Commission to review background material on this topic, consider the impacts to wildlife habitat and public access that might result from future possible development proposals, review past public comments on this issue, and prepare a letter to the City Council containing the Commission's concerns, stances and policy suggestions regarding the conservation easement on the Wildhorse golf course.

Commissioner Huber then closed public comment and opened discussion on this item. Ms. Reynolds provided some additional information for the Commission to consider in its deliberations. She said (1) there is currently no development proposal on the golf course property, (2) the Commission and the current City Council cannot take an action today that ties the hands of a future City Council, (3) staff does not typically spend time on projects until there is an agreement with the developer to reimburse the City for staff time, including City Attorney time, spent on the project, and (4) the property owner is entitled to a fair hearing if a development proposal is submitted to the City in the future.

Topics discussed included (1) background information about the past two development proposals, (2) the Commission's desire for additional education on the development process in general, (3) how this subject might overlap with the General Plan update process, (4) what research into this topic the Commission might do on its own, including possible legal research, (5) how this conservation easement differs from other conservation easements the City holds, (6) whether the Commission should send a letter to the City Council with its concerns after hearing more information on this topic, and (7) how the voter referendum may or may not impact the ability to amend this easement.

Commissioner Harrington then made the following motion: *"The Open Space and Habitat Commission invites our friends back next meeting in June to give us an informational/educational*

presentation to share their materials with us on this topic.” Commissioner Correa then made a friendly amendment to change “*friends*” to “*public commenters*.”

Commissioner Harrington then withdrew her first motion and replaced it with the following motion: “*The Open Space and Habitat Commission invites the public commenters today to provide an educational presentation about their research about the Wildhorse easement.*” Commissioner Vayssieres then made a friendly amendment to add “*and their concerns about development and particular amendments*” to the end of the motion, and that friendly amendment was accepted by Commissioner Harrington. Staff then summarized the Commission’s motion as follows: “*The Open Space and Habitat Commission invites the public commenters back to the June meeting for an informational/educational presentation about the Wildhorse conservation easement and their concerns about development and potential amendments.*” That motion was seconded by Commissioner Correa. The motion passed by a vote of 7-0-0-0 (Ayes – Cabanillas-Ledesma, Correa, Geonczy, Greco, Harrington, Huber, Vayssieres; Noes – None; Absent – None; Abstentions – None).

7. Subcommittee and Liaison Assignment Updates

A. Liaison Assignments

(1) *Lower Putah Creek Coordinating Committee (“LPCCC”)*. Commissioner Huber said that the LPCCC was now monitoring salmon on a real-time basis so that officials can better correlate the pulse flows going down the creek with the salmon swimming up the creek. He said the number of salmon returning to Putah Creek this year was disappointing due to several factors. He said the real-time monitoring will provide a more scientifically rigorous way to better understand the salmon run on the creek.

(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, June 2, 2025. Possible agenda items discussed included (1) an informational presentation by community members about the conservation easement on the Wildhorse golf course, and (2) a farewell and thank you to Commissioner Correa for her service on the Commission.

Ms. Reynolds also said she would check with the City Clerk’s Office to see if it had any presentation materials about the City of Davis development process.

Commissioner Harrington also said she would like the Commission to discuss in the fall a bill in the California State Legislature (Assembly Bill 524) which would create a new land access fund and a new program within the California Department of Conservation to offer leases to socially disadvantaged, limited-resource farmers as a way for them to more easily access farmland.

9. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at approximately 8:30 p.m.