

Open Space and Habitat Commission Minutes
Monday, September 8, 2025
Community Chambers Conference Room, 23 Russell Boulevard, 6:30 p.m.

Commissioners Present: Sara Geonczy, Christina Harrington, Patrick Huber (Chair), Eric Newman, Marc Vayssieres

Vacant Positions: None

Commissioners Absent: Ramiro Cabanillas-Ledesma, Steve Greco

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.

2. Approval of Agenda

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

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

Ms. Reynolds, staff to the Commission, updated the Commission on the status of a grant application to help fund the purchase of a 79-acre conservation easement on a parcel of farmland owned by the Beoshanz family. She also said City Open Space staff planned another prescribed burn at South Fork Preserve this fall. Finally, she reminded the Commission of the upcoming deadline to submit applications to serve on the General Plan Committee.

4. Public Comment

Dr. Glen Holstein said the land proposed for the Village Farms Davis development had some of the most classic vernal pools he had ever seen. He said the pools supported federally endangered species, such as the vernal pool tadpole shrimp. He said the area should be a park and not housing.

5. Consent Calendar

On consent was the approval of the June 2025 meeting minutes. Commissioner Vayssieres made a motion to approve the draft minutes. It was seconded by Commissioner Geonczy. The Commission voted 5-0-2-0 to approve the draft minutes (Ayes – Geonczy, Harrington, Huber, Newman, Vayssieres; Noes – None; Absent – Cabanillas-Ledesma, Greco; Abstentions – None).

6. Regular Items

Discussion Item – New Commissioner welcome and introductions

The Commission welcomed Eric Newman to the Commission. He provided the Commission with a brief overview of his background and why he wanted to serve on the Commission. There was no public comment. No action was taken.

Action Item – Provide recommendations on the open space and habitat features of the proposed Village Farms Davis development project

Staff gave the Commission a brief summary of the information contained in the staff report for this item. She provided an overview of the project, the entitlements process, and the feedback requested. She then briefly discussed each of the project's six proposed open space and habitat features:

Agricultural Buffer. She said the Village Farms Davis development proposal now envisions a typical ag buffer to be owned and maintained by the City. She said the approximately 11-acre ag buffer would be 200 feet wide and include (1) a 50-foot-wide section closest to the new homes that would include a multiuse path/native plantings, and (2) a 150-foot-wide section that would include native plantings and a realigned Channel A. Staff believe this ag buffer would be similar in look and feel to the City's existing North Davis Channel, she said.

Soil Borrow Site. She said the developer intends to excavate or "borrow" soil from land north of the project site to elevate the development pad out of the floodplain. This 107-acre soil borrow site would be between 8- to 10-feet deep, she said. Previously, this area was envisioned to be a habitat area owned and maintained by the City, she said. Due to concerns expressed by the City and Yolo County, the proposal is now to keep this area privately owned and farmed, just as it is now, she said. She said the development team is requesting two discretionary approvals: (1) that the 107-acre soil borrow site be zoned "Agriculture" once it is annexed into the City, and (2) that the 107-acre soil borrow site be exempt from the City's ag mitigation requirements. She said the City has requested additional information and commitments from the developer to be able to support these two requests with confidence before the Planning Commission and City Council, like a detailed soil restoration plan to ensure the soil borrow site was farmable after excavation. Instead, the developer provided the City with a report from an agricultural consultant that concluded the soil borrow site could be farmable assuming several years of soil restoration, she said. The report also included an outline of a soil restoration plan, she said. Staff did not believe this information was enough to justify the requested "Agriculture" zoning designation, she said, so staff included a provision in the draft development agreement that the developer would have to protect an additional 214 acres of farmland within the Davis Planning Area if the soil borrow site ultimately proved not to be farmable after five years. Staff believed adding this provision into the development agreement was the best way to mitigate for the uncertainty over the ultimate farmability of the soil borrow site at this time.

Agricultural Land Mitigation. She said it was important to note upfront that the Commission was not being asked to approve an ag mitigation plan or provide feedback on the location of the project's ag mitigation acres. She said the location of those acres had not been determined yet. Instead, she said the Commission was being asked for feedback on what the developer is requesting be included in the development agreement: (1) the developer is committing to comply with the City's ag mitigation ordinance and preserve twice as many acres as are being developed, and (2) the developer is asking that both the 107-acre soil borrow site and the 47-acre alkali playa area be exempt from the City's ag mitigation ordinance. She said staff are comfortable exempting the 47-acre alkali playa area from the City's ag mitigation requirement, but are less comfortable exempting the 107-acre soil borrow site from the City's ag mitigation requirement for the reasons already discussed.

Natural Habitat Area. A 47-acre alkali playa area/wetlands complex on the project site will now no longer be developed into housing, she said. This natural habitat area falls under the jurisdiction of state and federal authorities under the federal Clean Water Act, she said, and therefore is outside the City's regulatory authority. In the draft development agreement, the developer has committed to: (1) record a habitat conservation easement, or some other similar document, on this land, (2) prepare a management plan to protect the viability of this habitat area, and (3) provide a funding mechanism to

fund the management and monitoring of this area in perpetuity, she said. At this time, staff possess limited details about what entity would own this land, what entity would manage it, and what funding source would be available, she said.

Existing Native Trees on Project Site. There are 1,295 existing trees on the project site, which are a mix of natives and non-natives, she said. Most of those trees are along the existing Channel A, she said, and some will have to be removed to realign the channel and create the project greenbelts. She said 394, or 30%, will be removed and 901, or 70%, will be preserved.

Connectivity Between Project Open Space Areas and Existing Open Space Areas. The proposal now includes bike/ped crossings to the west and east of the project site, connecting the project's ag buffer to the North Davis Upland Habitat Area and North Davis Channel to the west, and to the Wildhorse Ag Buffer to the east, she said. The developer's latest proposal is scheduled to be discussed before the Transportation Commission on October 13, she said.

Representatives from the development team then were given the opportunity to speak for five minutes. Rochelle Swanson introduced the members of the development team who were present. She said the natural habitat area would be dedicated to the City in fee with a habitat conservation easement. She said at this time it was not clear what improvements would be required by the regulatory authorities. She said a lighting and landscaping district would provide the funding to the City to maintain the natural habitat area in perpetuity. She said the development team did not request that the soil borrow site be exempted from the City's ag mitigation requirement. She said remediation for that site must be done in real time. She said the development team wants the soil borrow site to remain in agriculture and be zoned "Agriculture" and not "Urban Reserve." She noted that the project also contemplates planting 3,500 new trees throughout the project site.

Commissioner Huber then asked if Commissioners had any clarifying questions. The Commission did not have any clarifying questions. Commissioner Huber then took public comment.

- Ning Wan said vacancy rates in the City of Davis are high and she doesn't see the need for more housing. She said she doesn't see the need to destroy farmland for this project.
- Dave McGann said he was skeptical about the proposed location of the project's park. He said it was a bad idea to locate it at the busy intersection of Covell Boulevard and Pole Line Road.
- Krista Altman said she supported the project and its thoughtful design. She said she opposed designating the soil borrow site "Urban Reserve," saying doing so would confuse people and not accurately reflect the site's proposed agricultural use.
- Susan Ranier said she was concerned about the project's proximity to the landfill and the power lines on Pole Line Road. She said she did not support any favors being given to the developer and that the project was not the best that it could be.
- Alan Pryor said he did not support designating the soil borrow site "Urban Reserve," saying doing so would be a cynical backdoor way to develop the parcel in the future.
- Katie Dooley said she was thrilled with the project's design and believed it was a true reflection of the community's values. She said the City needed the additional housing. She said she supported designating the soil borrow site "Agriculture" and not "Urban Reserve."

- Elizabeth Ray said the project site has haunted the City for ages. She said the developer was asking for concessions. She said the 107-acre soil borrow site was a “dig pit” and won’t ever be agricultural land again. She asked the Commission to think carefully about it.
- Sandy Whitcombe, a member of the development team, said her father was instrumental in designing the Village Farms project and his vision was to see connecting bike paths from another one of his projects - North Davis Farms - to this project. She said she did not support designating the soil borrow site “Urban Reserve.”
- David Blockland said there are many problems with the development proposal. He said the Commission’s job was to objectively weigh-in on the proposal and not be swayed by the desire to change things for the developer.
- Clark Morrison, lawyer for the development team, said the 47-acre natural habitat area will be preserved once the development team secures permits. He said the development team could not provide any additional details at this time. He said he was puzzled that staff stated in the staff report that they did not have enough information to make a confident recommendation.
- Eileen Samitz said the proposal had many problems, including connectivity issues and issues related to its proximity to the City’s old landfill. She said she believed there was a high level of arsenic in the soil. She said it was absurd to designate the soil borrow site “Agriculture,” as it was a “dig pit” and would not be farmable in the future. She also said she did not support designating the soil borrow site “Urban Reserve.” She said the soil borrow site should not be annexed into the City, but should be left in Yolo County.

Commissioner Huber then closed public comment and opened discussion on each of the six proposed open space and habitat features discussed in the staff report:

Agricultural Buffer. After some discussion about the project’s proposed agricultural buffer, Commissioner Vayssieres made the following motion: *“The Open Space and Habitat Commission agrees with staff’s recommendations in the staff report and further recommends that there should be sufficient wildlife cover on the agricultural buffer and drainage channel and north boundary to ensure wildlife movement.”* The motion was seconded by Commissioner Newman. The Commission voted 5-0-2-0 to approve the motion (Ayes – Geonczy, Harrington, Huber, Newman, Vayssieres; Noes – None; Absent – Cabanillas-Ledesma, Greco; Abstentions – None).

Soil Borrow Site. Commissioner Huber asked the development team’s agricultural consultant, Greg House, to come up to the podium and answer questions. He was asked whether a farmer would be willing to lease the soil borrow site to farm it and if it would be farmable after restoration. Mr. House said he believed someone would be willing to farm it and that it likely would be farmable in five years. He was asked whether the soil borrow site would stay wet too long to be productive farmland. Mr. House said he believed the site would be graded in such a way that most of the water would drain into Channel A. He was asked whether he found any arsenic in the soil. Mr. House said the arsenic was not a concern for crops because it was located very deep in the ground. He was asked if he knew of any similar soil borrow sites that had been successfully restored to farmland. Mr. House said he knew of a few but they were much smaller sites. He was asked if the top soil from the development pad could be spread onto the soil borrow site as well to assist with the restoration. Another member of the development team answered that the topsoil from the development pad was going to be used on the parks and greenbelts within the development.

Commissioner Harrington said she agreed that it was far-fetched to designate the soil borrow site as "Agriculture." She said she was not convinced that the proposed soil restoration plan would work. She said designating the soil borrow site as "Agriculture" appeared to be an attempt by the developer to sidestep the City's agricultural mitigation requirement. She also said she believed it was a missed opportunity to not spread the top soil from the development pad onto the soil borrow site.

Commissioner Huber asked staff if the "Agriculture" zoning designation could be changed in the future if the soil borrow site was not farmable in five years. Staff said that the zoning designation could be changed in the future if the City Council at that time directed staff to do so.

Commissioner Harrington then made the following motion: *"The Open Space and Habitat Commission recommends that the City Council (1) not approve an "Agriculture" land use designation for the soil borrow site if it is used for soil excavation, and (2) require the developer to stay true to the City's ag land mitigation requirements."* The motion was not seconded.

Commissioner Huber said he was willing to give the developer five years to restore the soil borrow site before they would have to mitigate for the loss of 107 acres of farmland. Commissioner Vayssieres agreed. Commissioner Harrington said she had never heard of such a large site being successfully restored before, and she was not confident the proposed soil restoration plan would work. She said, with all due respect to Mr. House, she was not convinced by the comparable restoration projects he cited. She said she believed the soil borrow site would be further degraded.

Commissioner Huber then made the following motion: *"The Open Space and Habitat Commission agrees with staff's recommendations in the staff report."* The motion was seconded by Commissioner Vayssieres. The Commission voted 3-1-2-1 to approve the motion (Ayes – Huber, Newman, Vayssieres; Noes – Harrington; Absent – Cabanillas-Ledesma, Greco; Abstentions – Geonczy).

Agricultural Land Mitigation. After some discussion about the project's agricultural land mitigation proposal, Commissioner Harrington made the following motion: *"The Open Space and Habitat Commission supports staff's recommendations in the staff report."* The motion was seconded by Commissioner Vayssieres. The Commission voted 5-0-2-0 to approve the motion (Ayes – Geonczy, Harrington, Huber, Newman, Vayssieres; Noes – None; Absent – Cabanillas-Ledesma, Greco; Abstentions – None).

Natural Habitat Area. Commissioner Vayssieres asked if public access would be allowed in this area although he wasn't convinced public access was compatible with this sensitive habitat area. Staff said the issue of public access would be dictated by state and federal authorities and that public access would likely be prohibited. Commissioner Geonczy asked if farming practices in this area would need to change given the endangered species that are present. Staff said the property owner cannot put the species in danger, but much higher restrictions would apply when the property is developed. Commissioner Huber said he was excited that this area will be managed properly as sensitive habitat in the future, and he asked what improvements to the area might be required. Staff said the level and type of improvements required will be determined at a later date.

Commissioner Huber then made the following motion: *"The Open Space and Habitat Commission supports staff's recommendations for this area in the staff report."* The motion was seconded by Commissioner Harrington. The Commission voted 5-0-2-0 to approve the motion (Ayes – Geonczy,

Harrington, Huber, Newman, Vayssieres; Noes – None; Absent – Cabanillas-Ledesma, Greco; Abstentions – None).

Existing Native Trees on Project Site. The Commission briefly discussed the trees that would need to be removed to realign Channel A and create the project greenbelts. No action was taken.

Connectivity Between Project Open Space Areas and Existing Open Space Areas. Commissioner Vayssieres said bike/ped connectivity to the west and east was very important and he asked staff if there were any guarantees that these crossings would actually get built. Staff said the City has discussed the importance of these crossings with the development team and they are taking them seriously. Commissioner Harrington recommended that the Commission relay its desire for open space connectivity to the Transportation Commission, which is discussing this issue on October 13.

Commissioner Harrington then made the following motion: “*The Open Space and Habitat Commission asks the Transportation Commission to keep in mind preserving connectivity between open spaces in the future.*” The motion was seconded by Commissioner Newman. The Commission voted 5-0-2-0 to approve the motion (Ayes – Geonczy, Harrington, Huber, Newman, Vayssieres; Noes – None; Absent – Cabanillas-Ledesma, Greco; Abstentions – None).

Commissioner Huber said he thought the proposed project did a good job of tying together the various open spaces. He said he was a longtime proponent of enhancing the connectivity of Channel A. Instead of box culverts in the channel, he said he would like to see open spans to enable wildlife movement along the channel. There was no additional discussion and no further action was taken.

Action Item – Elect new Commission Vice Chair for 2025

After some discussion, Commissioner Geonczy nominated Commissioner Harrington to be Vice Chair. Commissioner Huber then made the following motion: “*The Open Space and Habitat Commission nominates Christina Harrington to serve as Vice Chair of the Commission for 2025.*” The motion was seconded by Commissioner Vayssieres. The Commission voted 5-0-2-0 to approve the motion (Ayes – Geonczy, Harrington, Huber, Newman, Vayssieres; Noes – None; Absent – Cabanillas-Ledesma, Greco; Abstentions – None). There was no public comment.

7. Subcommittee and Liaison Assignment Updates

A. Liaison Assignments

- (1) *Lower Putah Creek Coordinating Committee (“LPCCC”).* Commissioner Huber said the LPCCC continues to look for solutions to the homeless encampment problem along the creek. He also noted the Winters Salmon Festival this year would be honoring the 25th anniversary of the Putah Creek Accord, the landmark agreement that restored flows to the lower creek and made it possible for the salmon to return.
- (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, October 6, 2025. Possible agenda items discussed included a discussion of the Open Space Program budget.

9. Adjournment

The meeting was adjourned at approximately 8:55 p.m.