

August 13, 2021

Nicholas Calderon, Director,
San Mateo County Parks Department
455 County Center, 4th Floor
Redwood City, CA 94063

Re: Draft Initial Study and Mitigated Negative Declaration for the Off-Leash Dog Recreation Pilot Program at Pillar Point Bluff and Quarry Park.

Dear Nicholas,

Thank you for the opportunity to comment on the above-referenced IS/MND. On behalf of Green Foothills and the Sierra Club, our comments encompass broader policy issues regarding the proposed Off-Leash Pilot Program, in addition to addressing the adequacy, accuracy, and completeness of the IS/MND, as the policy issues and the CEQA issues are closely related.

We strongly recommend: (1) that the Off-Leash Pilot Program be limited to Quarry Park, and (2) that enforcement of existing rules regarding On-Leash Dogs at Pillar Ridge be strictly enforced, for the following reasons:

1. Pillar Point Bluff is an integral part of the Fitzgerald Marine Reserve and includes Environmentally Sensitive Habitat Areas (ESHA) that have already been adversely impacted by both on-leash dogs and illegal off-leash dogs.
2. The Adopted Master Plan for the Fitzgerald Marine Reserve includes several foundational policies that the Off-Leash Dogs Pilot Program will inevitably violate; these were not included as a reference in the IS/MND; this is a serious omission.
3. The EIR and supporting studies for the Adopted Master Plan for the Fitzgerald Marine Reserve also were not included as a reference for the IS/MND; this is a serious omission.
4. The proposed Off-Leash Pilot Program at Pillar Point Bluff is inconsistent with the restrictions in the \$3,010,000 grant to San Mateo County to acquire the 140 acres of Pillar Point Bluff as approved by the Wildlife Conservation Board (June 2, 2011)
5. Many visitors will avoid areas where off-leash dogs are allowed; this “recreational displacement” is contrary to San Mateo County’s commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion in our County Parks, which should be available and welcoming to all people.
6. The County has a duty to protect the sensitive habitats and wildlife of this unique area.

Regarding Item 1: The IS/MND acknowledges that there are impacts from the On-Leash Dog Program that are already adversely impacting park resources. These include dog fecal material, which is described in the IS/MND, Biological Technical Memo, WRA, February 25, 2020: “On February 12, 2020 WRA biologists...traversed portions of the trails within the Study Area to determine...the baseline

conditions of habitat quality within view from the trails”. Also,” A subsequent site visit on August 1, 2020 was made to make general observations of visitor and dog use at each of the subject parks. At Pillar Point Bluffs, there were numerous locations along the Jean Lauer Trail where dog waste was found within 15 to 30 feet off the edge of the trail.” Our first concern is that a few hours walking on trails in both parks on only one day is hardly adequate time to assess baseline conditions and limiting the baseline condition assessment to what can be viewed from the trails is also woefully inadequate. Our second concern is that if on-leash dogs are already depositing fecal material as far as 30 feet from the trail, off-leash dogs will certainly venture even farther with attendant impacts to water quality and wildlife corridors. Notably, voice control of dogs is widely acknowledged as wishful thinking, except for the most highly trained canines, particularly on an unfenced trail with expansive open fields beyond, such as is the case at Pillar Point Bluff.

Dog urine is another potentially adverse impact to wildlife, as dogs “mark” their territory as they move along trails or venture beyond, and many wildlife species will avoid such marked areas; this was not addressed in the IS/MND.

Wildlife mortality: A documented and reported kill of a Harbor Seal pup in April, 2018 by an unleashed dog is another example of adverse impacts from off leash dogs; there are likely other instances of wildlife mortality due to off leash dogs on Pillar Point Bluff and Ross’ Cove beach and reefs that have not been reported.

Regarding Item 2: The Fitzgerald Marine Reserve Master Plan, Natural Resources Management Program includes the following policies that call for protection and restoration of the Park’s natural resources; this foundational policy document was not included in the IS/MND as a reference. The Off-Leash Dog Pilot Program at Pillar Point Bluff is inconsistent with these adopted policies and cannot be approved.

Policy 1: “Natural Resources within the Fitzgerald Marine Reserve will be protected and restored through development and implementation of resource management policies and programs.” Off Leash Dogs, if allowed, has the potential to adversely impact and further degrade the sensitive habitats and other natural resources at Pillar Point Bluff. Restoration of natural resources including improving and expanding vestiges of coastal terrace prairie habitat that are on Pillar Point Bluff, but not acknowledged in the IS/MND, should be a high priority.

Policy 7: “Special status wildlife and plant species shall be protected within the Reserve, and habitat management plans shall be developed to protect and restore all identified special status species.” “During implementation of the Master Plan, all areas where work is to be conducted shall be surveyed for special status wildlife and plant species prior to commencement of work. Habitat management programs shall be undertaken when special status species are identified and impacts to such species shall be avoided or mitigated, as required by State and federal law.” Work associated with the Off-Leash Dog Pilot Program including signage, low split rail fencing, has the potential to impact not only special status species, but lack of exclusionary fencing around the 100-foot buffer for wetlands is a significant omission, as special status plants and SFGS and CRLF may be adversely impacted. Signage

is insufficient to prevent on leash and off leash dogs from accessing the Ross' Cove beach at the southern end of Ross' Cove Trail with potential adverse impacts to shore birds and marine mammals.

Policy 11: “Introduction and possession of domestic and feral animals, including dogs, cats, ducks and any exotic, non-naturalized species are prohibited in the Reserve.” “Due to the potential for impacts to biological resources from predation or disease, dogs and other non-native species are not allowed within the Reserve. This policy will be implemented and enforced to prevent interference with and mortality of native species. Dogs will be allowed only on leash on the California Coastal Trail. Actions to remove existing populations of domestic and feral animals will be implemented by Reserve staff. This policy is consistent with County Code Section 3.68.080(i).” Clearly the allowance of Off-Leash Dogs is inconsistent with this policy that allows only On-Leash Dogs — and only on the California Coastal Trail.

Regarding Item 3: The EIR and supporting documents for the FMR Master Plan, which are an excellent source document for biological resources, were not included as a Reference for the IS/MND; this is a serious omission.

Regarding Item 4: The WCB's Land Acquisition Program is administered by the Wildlife Conservation Law of 1947 (Fish and Game Code Section 1300 et seq.) to acquire areas that can successfully sustain wildlife and provide for suitable recreation activities. The Grant describes the County's Management Objectives as: ***“The County will manage the property in conjunction with the adjacent Reserve and will preserve and protect the sensitive habitat found on the property while providing for the continuation of appropriate public wildlife-oriented recreational uses.”*** The only recreational use described in the Grant is: “The property is identified in the San Mateo County Trails Plan as a segment of the California Coastal Trail and would provide a critical .6-mile link in this trail.” The Funding Source is Proposition 40 (PRC Section 5096.650(a) that allows for the acquisition and protection of habitat to protect rare and endangered species, wildlife corridors, and significant landscapes and ecosystems...” (emphasis added). Due to the potential adverse impacts to species and associated habitats of concern, as well as wildlife corridors and ecosystems on Pillar Point Bluff, we believe that the Off-Leash Dog Pilot Program is inconsistent with the Grant Restrictions.

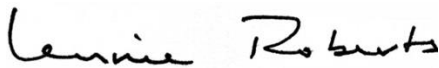
Regarding Item 5: For a variety of reasons, many visitors to our County Parks avoid visiting park areas where off-leash dogs are allowed. We are particularly concerned about the need for County decision makers to consider the many voices of people who do not speak up at public hearings, as well as the wildlife, wildlife habitats, and other resources that also don't have a voice. Significant numbers of people, including people of color, avoid visiting places where off-leash dogs are allowed. Some of these people are afraid of dogs, others have had negative experiences with uncontrolled dogs getting into fights with other dogs, chasing birds and small mammals, scaring young children, and even knocking down elderly folks or people with mobility or balance issues. People who are seeking a quieter or more contemplative experience, where they hope to see wildlife in its natural habitat will avoid places where these pursuits are disrupted by dog activities.

Our comments have focused on Pillar Point Bluff, because of its significance as a highly attractive area to visit which intensifies impacts to environmentally sensitive habitat areas (ESHA). During the pandemic when the main area of Fitzgerald Marine Reserve was closed, there was a tremendous increase in visitation at Pillar Point Bluff, and other sensitive areas of the Reserve, particularly according to locals. Social media continues to bring excessive crowds to environmentally sensitive park areas such as Pillar Point Bluff and Ross' Cove. County Parks has insufficient staff and other resources to adequately manage visitor behavior. As a result, overuse of the Marine Reserve's most sensitive areas, particularly the tidepools and beaches, as well as Pillar Ridge, continues unabated and is causing increasingly serious impacts.

We also have major concerns about compliance with existing requirements for On-Leash Dogs at Pillar Point Bluff. Even if Off -Leash dogs are not permitted, which we strongly support, the current level of non-compliance with leash requirements is likely to continue and should be mitigated adjacent to wetland/wetland buffer areas by installing exclusionary "wildlife friendly fencing" such as that used successfully for the past 20 years by Half Moon Bay along the Coastal Trail section south of Redondo Beach Road.

We respectfully request that the Board of Supervisors limit approval of the Off-Leash Dog Pilot Program to Quarry Park only, and strictly enforce the existing regulations that protect wildlife on Pillar Ridge.

Sincerely,



Lennie Roberts, Legislative Advocate
Green Foothills

Mike Ferreira, Coastal Issues Committee
Sierra Club Loma Prieta Chapter (SCLP)

cc: David Canepa, District 5, President, San Mateo County Board of Supervisors
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