



**SANTA CRUZ COUNTY
GROUP**

Of The Ventana Chapter

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Parks and Recreation Commission
Department of Parks and Recreation
Santa Cruz, California 95060

RE: San Lorenzo Park Redesign

Honorable Commissioners:

This letter is to convey the Sierra Club's endorsement of Concept B in the City's San Lorenzo Park redesign. The Club supports Concept B because it would restore the biggest area and best quality of riparian habitat, an ecological community that has both the greatest avian diversity and one of the most profound declines of any natural community in California. This letter also recommends changes to concepts A and B to be incorporated before the concepts are presented to the City Council.

Concept B Strongly Preferred

The City of Santa Cruz rightly has established goals and regulations for riparian protection, restoration and enhancement. One hundred and forty-four species of birds have been recorded in San Lorenzo Park, including numerous species known to nest in river woodlands. The most important habitat value of Concept B – and greatest failure of Concept A – is in protecting the flood-scoured open areas of the Benchlands, where willow, cottonwood and alder shoots, and perennial shrubs, are already emerging. Many riparian birds depend upon shrub cover and early successional habitat for successful nesting. These habitats require periodic flood scouring for establishment, as found in the Benchlands. The Benchlands also contain mature trees that benefit additional riparian species.

The City of Santa Cruz San Lorenzo Urban River Plan established goals for habitat restoration and protection. But, aside from improvements proposed for access points and Jesse St. Marsh, the River Plan did not propose restoration of riparian corridors. Concept B represents the best opportunity to fulfill the habitat restoration goals established by the San Lorenzo Urban River Plan, because the Benchlands contain the greatest area of floodplain and, unlike other river areas, are not thinned and disked for flood control.

Concept A, by contrast, would maintain a cleared riparian area “dead zone” solely for intermittent human events. In an era when riparian habitat is shrinking in the County, riparian birds declining and songbird numbers dropping precipitously (~30%) nationwide due to habitat loss, placing event space – a non-resource-dependent use – in a declining and sensitive habitat is morally unacceptable. Maintaining a cleared area of riparian habitat is equivalent to destroying it for non-site-dependent human activities.

Riparian habitat and species restoration would not only benefit declining wildlife, but also maximize the opportunity for passive recreation, citizen science, educational partnerships and public service experiences for elementary, middle, high school and college students. The best opportunity for education and research will be in the first years of recovery, when the low, brushy canopy important to many species is becoming established and diversifying. The importance and imperiled status of riparian habitat is recognized by federal, state, local and private agencies, many of which have created programs to restore riparian woodlands. The State Wildlife Conservation Board operates the California Riparian Habitat Conservation Program (CRHCP), funding riparian protection and enhancement across the State. The statewide Riparian Bird Conservation Plan (RBCP) by the Partners in Flight coalition found that, depending on bioregion, riparian habitat covers just 2% to 15% of its historic range in California, and that the loss of riparian habitats may be the most important cause of population decline among land bird species in western North America. Much of the remaining riparian habitat is degraded, fragmented, or confined with no upland component.

At least 67 bird species are known to nest in riparian woodlands, comprising the highest species richness of any habitat in California. This high diversity seems to depend, not on edge effect or plant species diversity, but on the volume of foliage and diversity of tree and shrub height. Of 17 bird species monitored as representative of riparian habitats in California, 11 have severely reduced breeding range and eight are in severe decline, due to habitat loss and fragmentation.

In Santa Cruz County, riparian habitat has been destroyed or degraded over much of the length of the Pajaro River, in the Watsonville Slough System and in College Lake. Ornithologists studying Soquel Creek report that riparian woodlands once filled with birdsong in spring have fallen quiet in recent years. Where quality habitat remains, it is often bordered by agricultural or urban development with no buffer. Restoration of the Benchlands represents a rare opportunity to both expand and restore a valuable County riparian habitat.

Modifications to Concept B

Concept B proposes two parallel trails running the length of the park. The upper trail overlooking the benchlands is more than adequate for transit, bird watching and other uses. The lower, adjacent trail would add disturbance and unnecessary impermeable surface without improving access in any significant way. In fact, the proximity of the lower trail would diminish the overall recreation experience by placing additional development and activity in the foreground, where natural habitat and a more aesthetic viewshed would provide a better experience for users of the upper trail. The lower trail provides an inviting, easily accessed area for loitering and temporary camping, discouraging public use and creating law-enforcement and maintenance costs for the City. Conversely, the establishment of extensive perennial trees and shrubs in the benchlands under Concept B would discourage camping.

The trail design provides too many out and back elements, creating redundant foot traffic and activity disturbance without adding to the quality of bird watching or to the walking experience. Emphasis should be placed on reducing the overall length without reducing habitat access, by establishing one loop trail with very short access points to the river shore. The west trail spurs along the river should be eliminated.

A peninsula overlook is not needed at the Branciforte Creek mouth if an overlook is provided at the upper trail. The lower overlook and connecting trail should be omitted in favor of preserving a disturbance-free area of habitat in the wildlife-concentrated confluence area. The terrestrial access to the creek mouth is narrow, and would be unduly disturbed by a trail through its center. The peninsula would have a better level of protection or isolation from predatory species such as rats, raccoons and other middle-level predators if maintained as an intact habitat block with no access. Additionally, waterbirds on the river, such as mergansers, grebes and diving ducks, concentrate in the river mouth area and should be buffered from onshore human disturbance. They can be viewed well from the upper platform, which should be constructed as a tall, accessible wood-frame structure rather than built on fill, as fill in this location eliminates habitat and is subject to erosion and settlement.

Because of the ecological questions concerning the number, location, and extent of the proposed trails, the trail system should remain as “concept-only” until a final plan can be evaluated and recommended by a qualified avian ecological consultant, based on scientific evidence regarding riparian trail impacts on both breeding and wintering birds and other wildlife.

Concept B should be modified to retain and expand the Duck Pond Amphitheater and to add a configuration for the playground and public facility building more like Concept A. The reasons for this are as follows:

- The duck pond amphitheater / music venue is a unique, beautifully designed and much loved feature of the park, with an island stage, fountain and seating near trees, with a wrap-around plaza and peaceful, much-used park benches lining the water border.
- The lily pond, which appears to support benthic invertebrates, provides habitat for waterbirds and a rare opportunity for birders to view and take up-close photographs of such beautiful species as green heron, great egret, American goldeneye, ring-necked duck, white-fronted goose, short-billed gull and many other migrants.
- The amphitheater associated with the duck pond appears to be comparable in size to the amphitheater proposed to replace the pond in Concept B. The existing Duck Island stage and amphitheater could be improved and expanded west, along the cork oaks, and east, where courts are proposed in Concept A. Seating could be added. This approach would enable the existing trees to be maintained and reduce grading.
- The courts may not be necessary, as courts are provided nearby in Mike Fox Skate Park that are usually vacant and seem adequate for local demand.
- The County of Santa Cruz could enter a reciprocal planning and funding process with the City, as the open lawns north of the lawn-bowling court could provide event space for festivals and gatherings in conjunction with the parking area associated with the County building. The County should consider transferring the lawn area to the City. The lawn area is not needed for parking, as County policies for environmental sustainability seek to

discourage auto usage and encourage workers, the majority of whom live less than one mile from the facility, to use alternative transportation.

- A larger playground area would better serve the community and provide a better basis for community and agency support.

In terms of the lake feature shown on the Benchlands, established wisdom calls for utilizing the physiographic or topographic attributes of the site rather than imposing new ones that may not be easily sustained. An added or excavated lake feature would present perennial maintenance issues with sedimentation, eutrophication, anaerobic sediment and other issues. It would also replicate the habitat already provided by the duck pond. As described above, the Benchlands are key to providing low-growth, young willows, alders and shrubs important to the majority of key riparian birds, which would be prevented or destroyed by artificial ponds.

The proposed plaza in Concept B should be moved and bent to the north and the playground expanded to the west, north and east. Trails should end into the plaza rather than continue across the plaza to create a gap, a crossing hazard and a visual barrier between the plaza and the community center. The bocce ball court does not take up too much space and should be squeezed into both concepts.

Concept A Modifications

Concept A would establish a much narrower riparian habitat vulnerable to predatory, urban fringe animals that would otherwise be rebuffed by the wider habitat of Concept B. Concept A is much less likely to support significant breeding habitat for riparian birds, particularly the flickers and woodpeckers that excavate nesting cavities which are used in turn by tree and violet-green swallows, western bluebirds, chickadees, wrens, owls, wood ducks and other species. Concept A should also be modified to retain the duck pond and Duck Island stage for the reasons given above.

Thank you for your informative public process and for the opportunity to provide our position on the options under consideration for restoring and enhancing San Lorenzo Park.

Yours Sincerely,

Kristen Sandel, Conservation Committee Chair

Michael Guth, Executive Committee Chair

Santa Cruz Group of the Ventana Chapter of the Sierra Club

Cc: Mayor Fred Keeley