



**SANTA CRUZ COUNTY
GROUP**

Of The Ventana Chapter

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Noah Downing, Park Planner
City of Santa Cruz Parks and Recreation Department
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February 12, 2023

RE: Environmental Stakeholders – Key Questions

Dear Noah,

We are writing to provide you with the Sierra Club response to the questions you presented at your stakeholders' meeting of February 7th, 2023, regarding the San Lorenzo Park design vision and process. We were represented at the meeting by Micah Posner and Jerry Busch, both members of our Executive Committee. We look forward to further work within this process. Please see the Sierra Club answers to your presented questions below.

1) Can you tell us a little bit about your group?

The Santa Cruz Group of the Sierra Club's Ventana Chapter is one of the largest, longest running environmental organizations in the County. The group advocates for wildland conservation, equity-based enhancement of the built environment, sustainable transportation, action on the climate crisis, and low-impact development (LID), in addition to leading walks, exploring nature and supporting stewardship and environmental education for youth and adults.

2) What is your view of San Lorenzo Park in light of your group's mission?

Our mission is to protect and explore the planet. More specifically, we aim to “protect and restore the quality of the natural and human environment,” and our vision includes “creating a healthy and sustainable natural and urban environment.” Our view of

San Lorenzo Park in light of our mission is to create a healthy, sustainable park facility that improves the natural and human environment and encourages humans to have a deeper connection with nature, specifically the river and associated riparian habitats – flora and fauna.

Habitat restoration (described below) should be designed to encourage human beings to learn about the habitat and the river. At least one trail, possible a boardwalk, though the benchlands should go all the way to the river itself and end at a beach or platform suitable for fishing and interacting with the water itself as well as birdwatching along the linear stretch of the river. Interpretive viewing nodes along the upper walkways should also be developed.

With the benchlands given up to riparian habitat, the upper portions of the park could be used for events. Events should not close the bike path.

The way that people without houses use the park should be integrated into the redesign, including one or more public bathrooms, that are supervised, ideally 24/7. Camping in or around the park should be well supervised by professional staff and take place in denoted areas only.

3) How could San Lorenzo Park better serve the river, watershed, and environment?

In terms of sustainability and environmental quality, as well as improving the watershed and the river, the city should restore the benchlands to riparian habitat. Riparian habitat along the lower San Lorenzo River has been thinned for flood maintenance to the point where it provides meager cover for wildlife, in a location where the habitat was once rich and diverse. Throughout Santa Cruz County, riparian habitat has been cumulatively degraded for flood control, channelized, culverted, squeezed by development, converted to farmland and overrun with invasive vegetation. The Pajaro River's riparian corridor has been thinned and cleared for flood control, displacing and reducing riparian bird populations. Elsewhere in California, riparian woodlands that once extended across wide swaths of the Sacramento and San Joaquin River valleys have been reduced to a fraction of their former extent. Many species of riparian birds now appear on lists of special status species whose distribution is shrinking or existence threatened.

Riparian habitat is sensitive, impacted and important that needs to be protected, restored and enhanced, both locally and statewide. The wide benchlands offer an invaluable opportunity to expand riparian habitat and to augment the existing river corridor vegetation that, while supporting a remarkable diversity of birds and other wildlife despite its degradation, would be substantially enhanced by the creation of a large patch of riparian habitat. Habitat blocks are vital to nesting birds, as they provide a buffer or safety zone from rodents, racoons and other bird predators. The restored woodland would also create space for flood relief and a natural filter where some of the contaminated sediment that floods down the San Luis River could be deposited before reaching ocean waves and beaches. Enhancements such as bird and bat houses could be included. The San Lorenzo Park area is the only segment where vegetation thinning is not conducted, underscoring both the possibility and the potential value of riparian habitat restoration.

Sea level rise and flood events associated with climate change point to habitat restoration in the benchlands as the most sustainable option. Riparian woodland is self-propagating and would cost next to nothing to install; maintenance would entail a little more than maintaining it free of invasive education. Riparian vegetation would passively recolonize the benchlands with dense forest and understory, allowing removal of the unsightly and dysfunctional chain link safety fences. By contrast, the effort to maintain lawns, barbeque areas and other floodplain facilities under a regimen of constant flooding and tidal events would be cost prohibitive and a waste of revenue.

4. What are the environmental/conservation issues that relate to the park?

Two important issues come to mind regarding vegetation management, although both issues have to do with landscaped areas bordering the park. The first is that maintenance staff have allowed the redwoods, Canary Island Pines and other vegetation within and adjacent to San Lorenzo Park. The loss of these mature and scenic trees not only illuminates valuable habitat and solar shade but eliminates vegetation that was planted to screen the 5-story County Building. Government sets a bad example allowing its own landscaping to deteriorate while requiring private landowners to maintain landscaping. The landscape maintenance failure is bad for the human environment and the natural environment. It takes only a modicum of water to maintain these pine trees

and redwoods; many of them already have irrigation systems in place. Interim measures are urgently needed to salvage and maintain these trees while the park plan is under development.

The second issue is promoting survivability of restored plant habitat along the levee based on varieties appropriate to the on soil and climate. Much of the original native vegetation planted along the levee after the levee-raising project has failed, and is not meeting performance standards overall. The city needs to prepare and implement a restoration and enhancement plan that will succeed, including considering plants that are succeeding already, such as sycamore, alder, redwood, bay, willow, ceanothus and manzanita species. The plan should establish a multi-story riparian habitat with shrubs, trees and low growing plants to create a habitat composition and structure conducive to biodiversity. Native habitat areas can be enhanced by transitional vegetation and buffers between park activity areas and restoration areas. Bottlebrush (*Callistemon spp.*) is a great candidate for transitional “edge” habitat along walkways, providing food and cover for a wide diversity of species, including Anna's hummingbird, Bewicks wren, ruby crowned kinglet, mockingbird, sparrows, Townsend's warbler, yellow rumped warbler and multiple other species. Turf areas in the park should be limited in extent to save water and maintenance costs, and should be and intermixed not only with trees, but with low flowering plants and shrubs such as bottlebrush, ceanothus, etc. to provide visual relief and habitat for wildlife; wildlife also enhances the human experience.

The duck pond and duck Island stage provide numerous enhancements to both the natural environment and human experience. The pond provides wildlife habitat for mallard, coot, ring-necked deck, American goldeneye, white-fronted goose, Common merganser, Canada goose, pied-billed grebe, green heron, gulls and more, birds that in turn enhance the birds that in turn enhance the Park experience for human visitors. Duck feeding is unhealthy for the pond and contributes to over-nutrication, but could be somewhat curtailed, and the habitat enhanced, by installing a vegetated margin along the edges. The duck Island stage has traditionally offered an attractive musical venue for groups and community organizations and should be restored and maintained. Public art is also an important amenity, particularly environment and nature-based art, and should be incorporated into the park budget.

5. Are there potential San Lorenzo Park partnerships between the city and your group?

Yes – the Sierra Club can investigate reaching out to members for volunteers to help with restoration and enhancement activities as needed, as well as to comment on and inform restoration plans. Sierra Club can also investigate supporting / vetting interpretive facilities.

We appreciate your consideration in this matter.

Yours Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Michael Guth".

Michael Guth, Executive Committee Chair
Santa Cruz Group of the Ventana Chapter of the Sierra Club