



AG + OPEN SPACE
SONOMA COUNTY

SONOMA COUNTY OPEN SPACE DISTRICT ADVISORY COMMITTEE

APPROVED MINUTES

747 Mendocino Avenue – Suite 100, Santa Rosa, CA 95401

May 25, 2023, | 5:00 pm

MEMBERS PRESENT:

Jan McFarland	Steven Rabinowitsh	Thembi Borrás	Bill Smith
Jesús Guzmán	Wendy Eliot	Michelle Whitman	John Schribbs
Mark Stapp	Don McEnhill	Curt Nichols	
Josh Proctor	Angel Lopez		

MEMBERS ABSENT:

Kristina Tierney	Paul Martin	Cary Fargo	Kevin McDonnell
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STAFF PRESENT:

Misti Arias, General Manager; Jennifer Kuszmar, Acquisition Manager; Allison Schichtel, Senior Conservation Planner; Sara Ortiz, Administrative Aide; Michelle Nozzari, Administrative Aide; Aldo Mercado, County Counsel; Mariah Robson, Advisory Committee Clerk

Call to Order

Chair Thembi Borrás called the meeting to order at 5:00 pm.

Public Comment

Duane Dewitt, Roseland Environmental Activist spoke about the mission of Ag + Open Space, permanently protecting land in perpetuity. Mr. DeWitt talked about the need to ensure there was no creep in mission to do things outside the scope of the District's mission like wildfire resilience. He also expressed the importance of "saving nature for nature's sake."

Susan Kirks, representing Paula Lane Action Network and Madrone Audubon Society, expressed her support for Duane DeWitt's comments. Ms. Kirks informed the Advisory Committee that it is dispersal season for young badgers. She reminded the Committee to remind others to drive slowly in West County to prevent juvenile badgers from being struck and killed during dispersal especially in West Petaluma and Bloomfield. She also gave an update that the adult badger abandoned the Paula Lane property. Ms. Kirks also stated that Supervisor Hopkins was hosting a Sea Otter Conference to address conservation efforts on returning Sea Otters to Bodega Bay.

Approval of Minutes from April 27, 2023

Chair Borrás asked for any comments or revisions to the April 27, 2023, minutes. There were none. Chair Borrás took roll call. A vote took place, and all were in favor and the minutes were approved. Don McEnhill and Curt Nichols abstained as they were not present at the April meeting.

General Manager's Report

Ag + Open Space has several items that are going before the Board including several Acquisition projects.

- 6/6: 2023 Vegetation Management Grant Recommendations, Regional Conservation Partnership Program – Vital Streams and Forests
- 6/13-6/23: County Budget Hearings
- 7/11: Armstrong Redwoods State Natural Reserve – Ayers Addition to Armstrong Redwoods State Natural Reserve, Chanslor Ranch, Lafranchi (Laguna), Outings and Education Contracts, Denner Ranches Conservation Easement, Environmental Services Contracts, Fitch Mountain Open Space Preserve – County Slope Easement along Fitch Mtn Road (Joint with Transportation and Public Works), Second Amendment to Cinquini & Passarino Contract

Acquisition Project Updates

- The Soda Springs Ranch Open Space Preserve project was approved by the Board of Directors on Tuesday, May 22, 2023. This 208-acre property just outside the City limits of Cloverdale will be transferred to the City of Cloverdale as a park and open space preserve.
 - Most of the property is visible from Highway 101, Cloverdale Boulevard, and other public roads in Cloverdale. Porterfield Creek Trails Open Space Preserve is in proximity, but not adjacent to, the southern property boundary. The property is undeveloped and has been historically used for timber harvest, hunting, grazing, equipment storage, personal recreation, and open space.
 - The property is in the Porterfield Creek watershed and contains 0.33 miles of the North Branch of Porterfield Creek. Additionally, 0.78 miles of an unnamed tributary to Cloverdale Creek runs along the property's northern border, and other small, intermittent tributaries to Porterfield Creek and Cloverdale Creek cross the property. The property features mountainous land, with oak woodlands and other hardwoods, chaparral, grasslands, fir forest, as well as redwood groves and riparian vegetation surrounding the creeks.
- Chanslor Ranch: There was an article in a local newspaper that had some misinformation about the District's deal with the landowners. Misti Arias and Ag + Open Space staff are going out with the Press Democrat on Friday, May 26, 2023, with the landowner, Regional Parks, and Supervisor Hopkins, to clarify that the District is in contract to purchase Chanslor Ranch.
- There are about a dozen projects that are approaching the closing phase (if landowners accept offers). Get ready to hear about a lot of exciting closings soon!
- Amy Ricard and Ms. Arias attended Together Bay Area lobbying day at the State Capital and had meetings with several State Senators & Assembly members.

Vegetation Management Program Updates



- The program received 36 proposals for the 2023 Vegetation Management Grant Program – the evaluation committee recommends funding 19 of these projects for a total of \$3.1M – this item will be presented to the Board of Supervisors on June 12, 2023.
- Since 2021 the Vegetation Management Grant Program has approved 46 grant agreements resulting in 3,125 acres of treated area including over 51 miles of shaded fuel breaks, 675 homes with defensible space, 55 miles of roadside treatments, 615 acres being grazed or used for prescribed burns and 19,210 will be environmentally compliant for future fuel reduction treatments under the California Vegetation Treatment Programmatic Environmental Impact Report
- The projects being recommended for 2023 will add 8.7 miles of roadside treatments, 30 miles of shaded fuel breaks, 2,500 acres being grazed or will use prescribed burns and 26,411 acres will be evaluated for future treatments under the California Vegetation Treatment Program.
- The grant program will support a concentrated effort to improve prescribed burning efforts between fire districts and Fire Forward fire training efforts. The fire districts will bring equipment and fire professionals and Fire Forward will offer trained volunteers to work together to complete burning programs on lands compliant with CEQA.
- The Vegetation Management Program is investing PGE Settlement Funds into the Living with Fire: Sonoma County Forest Conservation Conference to be hosted at Shone Farm on June 23-24, 2023. This conference is being hosted by the Sonoma County Forest Conservation Working Group.
- The National Fish and Wildlife Foundation has awarded a grant to Ag + Open Space for \$353,173.79 for capacity building and technical assistance to landowners on wildfire resilience, watershed protection, carbon sequestration and natural resource management. This grant will be matched 1:1 by the PGE Settlement Fund and will focus on a series of workshops throughout the Russian River watershed and will be co-led by Gold Ridge and Sonoma Resource Conservation District and many other partners.

Chair Borrás opened the meeting for questions and comments from Advisory Committee members and members of the public.

Member Whitman asked if Chanslor Ranch was purchased in fee and what the price was. Staff clarified that the land was to be purchased in fee with the expectation to transfer the land to Regional Parks within one year. This purchase has not been completed and the purchase price is not publicly available. This item will also go before the Board on June 12, 2023.

Duane Dewitt asked for clarification of what time this item will go before the Board. The General Manager shared what information she had about when she was attending.

Susan Kirks expressed her excitement about the District's acquisition of Chanslor Ranch. Madrone Audubon conducts a Christmas bird count annually. Ms. Kirks also remarked positively on the General Managers talk at the Together Bay Area Conference, which the District sponsored.

Subcommittee Report Outs



Acquisition Subcommittee – There were no updates.

Agricultural Subcommittee – Presented by Josh Proctor – This subcommittee has not met yet.

Endowment Subcommittee – Presented by Vice Chair Eliot and Chair Borrás

- The Subcommittee is comprised of Fiscal Oversight Commissioners and Advisory Committee members, and they reviewed calculations for the development of a long-term Endowment Fund for Stewardship. District funds are set to expire in 2031, if not reauthorized by the public. If that happens, the District will be left with a lot of perpetual obligation. Currently the District is getting 1-3% interest on investment but will need approximately 4% return on investment (which is conservative) to meet future obligations. If there is no change to the current strategy this will gut funds to the District's acquisition work. To invest at the rate needed, there needs to be a legislative change that allows the District to invest in long term financial instruments like retirement pensions. This sort of legislative change will take years to achieve, and many details of this fund will develop with input from stakeholders. The goal is to have the legislative change completed by 2026. Once the District pays off the bonds, the money the District was previously allocating to that payment can start the Stewardship Endowment to address perpetual Stewardship obligations. The Subcommittee is in agreement to support setting up the endowment.
- Discussion: Questions arose around what policies prevented the district from long term investments like CDs. Chair Borrás, Vice Chair Eliot, and Ag + Open Space staff clarified that the current investments of the District were in the County's pooled investments and were currently governed by Government Code 53601 which stipulated how money could be invested in short term investments only. Once legislation was changed the Stewardship Endowment would be able to invest in long term investments and the strategy would be developed and managed outside the County's pooled investments. There were more questions and for the sake of time the General Manager proposed agendaizing this item in the future to answer additional questions. Public member Duane Dewitt also expressed support of the District saving funds and taking a proactive approach in preparing to meet future obligations through the creation of an Endowment Fund.

Ad Hoc Matching Grant Subcommittee – Presented by Member Guzmán

- The Subcommittee will meet on May 30th to review round 2 Matching Grant Recommendations.

DOC Riparian & Ag Grant update

Presentation by Allison Schichtel, Senior Conservation Planner

Ms. Schichtel gave an update on Riparian Protection Efforts: Dept. of Conservation Working Lands & Riparian Corridors Grants. Ag + Open Space is in partnership with Sonoma RCD & NRCS and was able to secure funding to launch a Riparian Easement program.

Ms. Schichtel opened the meeting for questions and comments from Advisory Committee members and members of the public. A discussion took place.

For more information, please feel free to contact Ms. Schichtel at Ag + Open Space. The PowerPoint Presentation is available upon request.



Proactive Conservation Outreach update

Presentation by Jennifer Kuszmar, Acquisition Manager

- Ag + Open Space Acquisition Team continues to work to be proactive in land acquisition projects. The team has taken steps to determine what the District can do in Sonoma County to protect land long term. The District identified that in the Northeast part of the County there was significant biodiversity.
- The Acquisition Program is also working to “clear the deck” by moving projects off the list of active projects.
- Currently the Acquisition Team has 12 projects that will be closing in 6 months. It is important to have capacity ready for new properties.
- The District sent the DOC mailers that Ms. Schichtel discussed to 130 landowners. This allows the District to fast track up to 20 projects in each target area at a time.
- The District is working in partnership with Greenbelt Alliance, to do a park and recreation gap analysis to help set priorities for the District to see where there are needs for parks or open space.
- The Acquisition Program seeks to “Always Be Closing” on projects, and to keep the momentum, the team is also staying in touch with project partners and landowners to ensure that future land in the area can be acquired. It is important to build trusting relationships with landholders so that when the opportunity to buy is available, the District can do so.

Ms. Kuszmar opened the meeting for questions and comments from Advisory Committee members and members of the public. A discussion took place that emphasized the importance of having greenbelts and community separators to limit overdevelopment between cities and towns, and this is especially important when it comes to fires and upholds community identity. The District plans to have both a proactive and reactive approach to acquisitions but is selective about projects and the team is shifting energy to allow for relationship building.

For more information, please feel free to contact Ms. Kuszmar at Ag + Open Space.

Projects in Negotiation

Ms. Kuszmar talked about the attachment materials that were included in the packet, including a map showing active projects in each supervisorial district and what stage the projects are in.

For more information, please feel free to contact Ms. Kuszmar at Ag + Open Space.

Announcements from Advisory Committee Members

Chair Borrás asked for any announcements from Advisory Committee members.

- Mark Stapp announced that Sonoma State in partnership with Graton Rancheria was having an event at Fairfield Osborn Preserve.
- Steven Rabinowitsh gave an update about the Southeast Santa Rosa Greenway Project. The State agreed to sell property. This was a big hurdle that was overcome. This project is 12 years in the making and has input from the City of Santa Rosa, County and State officials.



- Jesus Guzman announced that Healdsburg Future Farmers of America Fair (FFA) is on May 26 & 27 & FFA Twilight Parade is taking place on May 25, 2023.
- John Schribbs announced Old Adobe Day was coming up on May 27, 2023.

Adjournment

Chair Borrás adjourned the meeting at 6:48.

Next Meeting: August 24, 2023

This meeting will be in person with an option for members of the public to join via zoom. The meeting place is: 747 Mendocino Ave, Ste 100, Large Conference Room, Santa Rosa

Respectfully submitted,

Michelle Nozzari
Advisory Committee Clerk in Training

