

Meeting Summary

Hamilton Community Forum: Wetlands Restoration Project Meeting

October 12th, 2011, 7:00 - 8:30 p.m.

Location: Novato Arts Building
Upstairs "War Room"
500 Palm Drive, Novato, CA 94949

Meeting Purpose:

- Provide the community and interested parties with an update on the Hamilton and Bel Marin Keys V wetlands restoration projects.
- Provide the community and interested parties with an opportunity to ask questions and get information.

Action Items:

- Meeting summary will be posted on Project website
- Handouts will be posted on Project website

Welcome and Introductions:

Harvey Abernathey, Hamilton Community Forum co-moderator, introduced meeting speakers.

In opening remarks, Tom Gandesbery of the State Coastal Conservancy announced the launching of the new Project website at <http://hamiltonwetlands.scc.ca.gov/>. He explained that the Conservancy has contracted with the Center for Collaborative Policy (CCP) to implement a program to communicate with and engage the public about the Hamilton and Bel Marin Keys V restoration projects.

Communications Plan

Ariel Ambruster of CCP said the communication plan was developed by Dorian Fougères of CCP, based on interviews, focus groups and a survey of area stakeholders, agency representatives and others interested in the restoration project. New outreach and engagement tools will include a bimonthly electronic newsletter, website enhancements and the eventual convening of a stakeholders group to provide input to the Project. She introduced Grace Person, a member of the facilitation team who took notes at the meeting. Meeting summaries will be posted on the website and will help track the public's comments, questions, and concerns regarding the Project. She invited attendees to sign up for the newsletter e-mail list.

Questions/Comments:

Comment: Glad to hear the notes from the meeting will be available on the website.

Hamilton Wetlands Restoration Project context, progress and summary of future work

Robin Liffmann, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, gave an overview of Hamilton Wetlands restoration work, described current activities and plans for future activities.

Key points included:

- Major construction occurred from 2005-2006, with 5.8 million cubic yards of fill placed in the wetland between 2007 and 2011.
- Now contractors are working to shape the seasonal portion of the wetland
- Starting the week of October 19, construction will begin to raise several levees 1-2 feet. If it is too wet, the work will be postponed.
- Work is about to begin to install utilities to the building that will become the Project nursery. This work will occur near the end of Portsmouth Drive. As soon as a schedule is finalized, the Army Corps of Engineers will inform every homeowner on Portsmouth Drive by mail and post the information on the Project website. Homeowners near the construction will be contacted individually. Construction will not occur before 8:00 am and mostly likely not on Friday, Saturday or Sunday.
- This winter, other planned work includes construction on the outboard levee and possibly installation of culverts. Culverts would keep the site wet without the need to operate pumps, allowing water to move in and out with tidal flow.
- The fall volunteer planting at the nursery has been postponed but should start in the fall of 2012. Once the nursery is open, there will be nursery management to coordinate volunteer activity.
- Dredging to breach the outer levee and open the site to tidal flow is planned for November 2012. Preparation for the breach will include work in summer 2012 on intertidal berms and removal of the pump houses. The breach site will be at the pump house area. Work on the outboard levee and marsh area won't start until September, as earlier work could disturb or harm the endangered clapper rail bird.
- There will be ongoing activities in the seasonal areas for several years after the breach, specifically planting.
- The Army Corps will continue to inform residents of construction activities via mailed postcards for work immediately adjacent to residences.
- A 2.6-mile segment of the Bay Trail will be completed prior to the breach. It will parallel the levee on the Bay side. At one point the connector trail will cross a City-owned levee. Tom Gandesbery is working with the city to obtain an easement to allow the Corps to construct the trail in the summer of 2012. The trail will run on the east side of the cinderblock wall on the City's levee. The design will be finalized this winter, with construction occurring in the summer and fall. The overall trail design has not changed substantially from the 2005 plan, which is on the project website. The main change is use of conventional asphalt rather than a terra-pavement product.
- The trail will include pullouts, benches and two overlooks with interpretative signs, one at Pacheco Pond, and the other at the trail's southern end. Project managers will hold a public meeting on the final trail design once there are agreements with the city.
- The trail will be paved with asphalt, as it is less costly and has a proven track record for durability to withstand extensive pedestrian use and occasional staff vehicle traffic.
- Project managers are in discussion with the Marin-Sonoma Mosquito and Vector Control District, which regularly reviews wetlands plans. One topic being explored is District

management of the water control structures in the north seasonal area; the District already manages the Rush Creek wetlands area, and it could make sense to use the District's expertise.

- The good news is that we still have good funding for the project, to carry through the breach and beyond.

Questions/Comments:

Q: How high will the levees be raised?

A: Two feet on average, 1-2 feet generally.

Q: Is the delay in starting volunteer planting because of permitting delays?

A: Not permits per se, but mainly due to construction delays. Some sites are not ready for plants to be put in.

Q: Is the trail where the levee is right now?

A: In some areas, the trail will be along the levee, but a few feet below the crest. In other areas, the trail will be atop the levee.

Q: It looks like the location of the trail won't be on the levee?

A: The trail will follow the levee lower down on the wetland side.

Q: What kind of access to the City-owned levee will there be? Would people have to climb over the cinderblock wall?

A: Right now, all we know is that we are going to build the trail, but the rules about who can use the trail on top of the City-owned levee are up to the City. Access points already exist for the trail at Hanger Avenue, off Todd Road, on the City's trail over the hill, and possibly another in the hanger area.

Q: Would they move the splash wall then?

A: There would be gap in the splash wall where trail users could go through.

Q: Please describe how wide the trail will be. It seems sandy -- will it be compacted?

A: It is being compacted right now, but we are uncertain of the width, as the design is not yet completed – possibly 12 feet wide, with eight feet of asphalt pavement.

Q: Will the Bay Trail one day go all the way to San Francisco?

A: This is just a segment of the Bay Trail. The Bay Trail plan envisions that the trail will circle the Bay. At the moment, we can only build what is on the property. When we received permits to build the wetlands, there was an agreement to build 700 feet short of the outboard wetland, which has populations of endangered clapper rail birds. The northern section would end at Pacheco Pond, but the Conservancy plans to extend the trail into Bel Marin Keys V.

Q: Though you have to stop 700 feet short of the southern end of the trail, will there be gates there?

A: The design is not yet complete, and that is not part of the conceptual plan. There are casual trails there now which will probably connect to the Bay Trail, and access will likely be left open.

Q: How is the process going with getting the easement from the City of Novato? Is there any holdup on the City's side to get the easement finalized?

A: It is moving along with the City, and may go before the City Council in November. Design would take 3-6 months, and then the easement would need approval from the state, the Department of General Services real estate offices in Sacramento, which would take about 3-6 months. So the timing will work out, which is good news.

Q: At one time there was talk about planting along the trail to shield birds from trail users, which would block views. Is that something that is still being talked about or will we be able to view the birds?

A: We did have a berm feature, but no longer plan to make the vegetation that high. There will be some trees planted along the wildlife corridor with hills and mini hills, but not a lot of bushes and trees, mostly smaller plants.

Q: Please describe the wildlife corridor.

A: The handout includes an artists' rendition of what the wetland will look like. The dark area along the hangers is the wildlife corridor. It will be a transition area that is a half-foot to a foot higher than the rest of the tidal wetlands, below the Bay Trail but above the tidal wetlands. There will be a short wire fence some feet off the trail to remind people not to enter the wildlife area.

Q: What can we do about the coyotes that are keeping us up at night? I live on Portsmouth.

Comment from audience: Coyotes are all over, including near the vacant Coast Guard housing -- you can find coyote scat up by the pool in that area. Coyotes are on Reservoir Hill, on Ammo Hill. A member of the audience thought that coyotes were displaced from the wetland restoration site, and have moved into the surrounding neighborhoods.

A: We did not have a solution to the howling coyotes.

Q: There was an infestation of midges. What is the proactive plan to deal with mosquitoes, which could be a bigger issue, especially with the seasonal wetlands?

A: The project is already working with the vector control and will continue to do so into the future. Midges were coming from part of the seasonal wetland area but mostly a lot of the infestation came from the park area. When the grasses are wet, midge populations will occur for a 2-3 week period. As the seasonal areas build up, there will be a lot less water, and there should be less of an issue from the seasonal area, but that is not going to alleviate the problem from parks and homeowners' yards.

Q: Is there a plan to use natural mosquito-eating fish or things like that?

A: We could do that, but since you have one of the better mosquito abatement districts in the state, we would likely rely on them.

Q: What about the smells? The smells have increased in the last year. They don't hang around for a long time, but at times are overwhelming.

A: The odors are coming mostly from Pacheco Pond and to some extent from the seasonal wetlands. The winds carry the odor into the neighborhoods. The odors come from the natural processes of organic material decaying in a low-oxygen environment. The watershed is part of an urban watershed, and that pond has more urban runoff and fertilizer in it than it would naturally, and also has a restricted connection to Novato Creek. We would like to enhance the pond as part of Bel Marin Keys V phase of the project, but there are challenges with that, too. The marsh system will take time to develop into a well-functioning living system that will have few odors. The accidental wetland in the bulge area where the access road goes through will also be addressed to manage the water better so as to decrease odors from that area. It is not a natural wetland. BRAC work will reroute the access road and improve drainage there. The involved property is City-owned, so will require coordination.

Q: So there will be more smells as you expand the seasonal wetlands?

A: Not necessarily. There will be living organisms. During the dredging process, the soil is not living but decaying, which can cause smells. When there is a well-functioning living system you won't have as many smells. Because it is a tidal area along the Bay, there will be smells, but it won't smell like a monkey house at the zoo, as one resident described it. Odors off the bay front along the existing marsh will be what you can expect off this marsh. There will be a transition period where the whole marsh is developing so there may be some smells during that time.

Q: Is there still a timeline to breach the Hamilton portion of the wetlands in 2014?

A: The plan right now is to breach in 2012. If things change, we will let you know.

Q: Not the north Antenna Field?

A: No. The pump houses are where the breach will be. Most of the construction will take place in late summer and early fall.

Q: Will there be an announcement on the levees?

A: Yes, absolutely. There will also be a fact sheet put together for Congress. This year's fact sheet includes the announcement of a ribbon-cutting event.

Q: How long will the utilities construction for the nursery building take?

A: We are not sure –estimated between 4-6 weeks total, but in phases.

Q: Have they pinned down where the easements are between houses?

A: Yes, and we are confirming that the contractor has spoken with the owners who will be affected.

Comment: There was concern that one owner will lose their fruit trees.

Response: The connection will only be in the back corner of their lot – the workers will not be tearing up the entire backyard.

Q: We have seen flags and chalk marks on Portsmouth Drive recently. Is that you?

A: We will have to ask the contractor, as there could be other work going on there. It is probably not us, since the contractor is waiting for permits. I can check.

Q: Are they going to be planting shrubbery to cover the fencing by the nursery? Any Idea when?

A: Yes, planting will happen after workers finish the utility lines, the construction, and the fence. There is already discussion on the types of plants they will use.

Comment: It would be nice to have native plants, with flowers.

Q: There are wetland areas in Florida with boardwalks and signage that are a great educational opportunity. Can we expect anything like that? Or do any fundraising to help you do any of that?

A: Fundraising is always appreciated. The overlooks will have interpretive signage.

Q: But no boardwalks out into the wetlands?

A: Not out into the wetlands, but we could revisit that. You could provide us with specific examples of what you'd like to see. There are some hurdles for boardwalks, coordinating with agencies concerned about allowing people out into the wetlands, since it is habitat. The biggest hurdle is who takes care of that infrastructure in perpetuity, because the Conservancy isn't set up to do that. The hope is that the Conservancy can hand the whole restoration project over to the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service once it is complete, but their budget might not allow for boardwalk maintenance.

Q: Near the nursery building there is a social trail, access from Portsmouth Drive to Ammo Hill. When the gate in the fencing is put in, and the rains come, people will be forced to walk through a flooded area on their way to Ammo Hill. Is there a way that planks or some adjustment can be made so people can get access to the social trail?

A: There will be additional fencing to keep people out of the construction zone for safety reasons, but we have already pulled the fence line so that the existing trail will be accessible when they are done with construction.

Q: The cyclone fencing to my understanding is temporarily permanent and thus will not move?

A: Per the last meeting with the contractor, they are repositioning the cyclone fence to be closer to the nursery building to provide access to the trail. Where is the low spot, closer to the road?

Comment: Yes, the low wet spot is closer to the road, almost like a creek bed that we have to walk through. With the wet season coming, it will be worse. Maybe planks could be an option?

Response: That is the actual drainage for the area, and we cannot fill it in. We can take a look at what can be done. Probably the more long-term solution would be a culvert through the area.

Comment: You provide the planks, and we'll put them out and incur the liability.

Response: It is difficult to say who has jurisdiction of the portion of property in question. It was the Army Corps' decision to allow the developer to put the street drainage there, and the drainage is also feeding the accidental wetlands.

Planning Review for Bel Marin Keys Unit V Wetlands Restoration Project

Tom Gandesbery from the State Coastal Conservancy provided an update on the Bel Marin Keys Unit V Wetlands Restoration project planning process.

Key points included:

- The original project included the airfield and antenna field as one project, approved by the 1998 Congress. The Conservancy purchased the hayfields at Bel Marin Keys V later, which were officially added to the project by Congress in the 2007 Water Resources Development Act. The 2008 state fiscal crisis impeded the project, as bond funding, needed under the cost-share arrangement, was not available. Since then, the Army Corps of Engineers' interpretation on the state's percentage cost share has changed. The Conservancy is seeking language in the next Water Resources Development Act to clarify the state's cost-share for the Bel Marin Keys V portion of the project. It isn't clear when Congress will make that change. There is also a possibility it could get resolved in an omnibus spending bill this year.

- Lessons learned from doing the Hamilton Wetlands restoration project include the cost of bringing in dredge material. It is very expensive to pump material from the Bay into Hamilton. We are doing an assessment on how to get dredge material for Bel Marin Keys Unit V via a less expensive means, and looking at ways to use less dredge material. It is estimated that 10 million yards of sediment is needed for Bel Marin Keys Unit V. The seasonal wetlands area will not need fill.
- Resolving the language through federal legislation will possibly take 1-2 years. The good news is that federal authorization for Bel Marin Keys Unit V already exists, as additional authorizations are very difficult to obtain, and the core technical staff members at the Army Corps are excellent.
- The Conservancy's consultant is working on the BMKV design, with the goal of having a shovel-ready project that can get started right away once the other challenges are resolved.
- The handout shows two cross-sections of the conceptual plan. Some areas may be deeper than shown if less dredge material is used.
- In regards to the trail, the EIR looked at whether to bring the trail around the "Headquarters Hill" (currently owned and occupied by Brahma Kumaris), but there are some sightline issues with the Bel Marin Keys Boulevard and driving speeds, so the design places the trail on the pond side of the hill. There is a parking area on the Pacheco Pond side that could be used by trail users. Again, this segment of the Bay Trail is not part of the current work, but a future phase.
- Novato Sanitary District discharges to the Bay through a pipeline between the airfield and Bel Marin Keys Unit V. We are studying what kind of access the District will need to the pipe, and the possibility of moving or truncating the pipe, or possibly using the wastewater to benefit the wetland. The quality of the effluent coming out of the pipe is very high. We should know more about this issue by the end of 2011.
- One possible design change to economize is to build a straight flood control levee rather than the curved levee originally planned.
- In regards to the North Antenna Field, the Army Corps of Engineers Formerly Used Defense Sites (FUDS) office, which cleans up past contamination problems, is finishing up their work in Hamilton. There will be an update on October 13 at the Restoration Advisory Board (RAB) meeting here. Truck traffic coming out of the site will soon end. There is extra soil from their work that will be used for the new levee.

Questions/Comments:

Q: Where would the Bel Marin Keys Bay Trail go? Cross section A-A?

A: The environmental document explores different options. The trail is shown as a dotted line on the conceptual plan. If Pacheco Pond was enlarged, it would run along the outside of the pond, along the top of levee and the new wetland area, ending at Bel Marin Keys Blvd.

Q: Does the Sanitary District pipeline run underneath the levee?

A: It runs right next to the levee. The District easement provides for all-weather access to the pipe, so we have to provide them access unless we work out some other design.

Q: So there would effectively be two separate wetlands areas because there is no crossover?

A: Yes, because there would be no connection between them. Environmentally, it doesn't matter, because wetlands tend to be at that scale -- 400-500 acres is not an unusual size, and wildlife does go across the road now. The road will have a chain and a "no entry" sign across it.

Q: So all the dark green shown on the conceptual plan will all be seasonal wetlands?

A: Yes, again, that is what the consultant will look at. We have studied managing the whole area as seasonal wetlands until the Army Corps can come in, but we decided that was too much effort given the environmental pay offs.

Q: Is there still going to be a change to Todd Road for the access point to Bel Marin Keys Unit V?

A: We will still need access for Bel Marin Keys Unit V, and Todd Road is the main access road for that. There may be a ramp developed to route traffic off Todd Road, or trucks could use an existing ramp, but it has a 180-degree turn that is difficult for big trucks to take. We would either keep Todd Road as the access and built a new ramp or go around the other side of the landfill. A ramp would be built in conjunction with better drainage.

Comment: It would be nice if traffic can be rerouted around the other side of the landfill because of the foot traffic that occurs on Todd Road.

Response: On the other hand, a lot of people walk on the other side of the landfill, also.

Comment: But there is more pedestrian use on Todd Road.

Response: We will continue to work with the City of Novato, since the area will be city open space. As long as we can bring in trucks when needed, it should be fine. It is just not feasible to bring heavy equipment in on Bel Marin Keys Blvd because of the sightlines and the turns.

Q: For the cleanup of the North Antenna Field, most of the truck traffic went around the northwest berm of the landfill. What is the most common route the truck traffic might take during the Bel Marin Keys Unit V phase?

A: We would prefer to run the truck traffic along the potential new ramp/drainage project on that side of the levee because it is a straighter shot. Larger trucks with excavating equipment have restrictions on ground clearance and turning radiuses. Todd Road meets existing requirements, so trucks can deliver all the way into the site. The final design of the road going around Ammo Hill would suffice for that, but right now, some trucks cannot access the site from that direction.

Comment: I was referring to the general truck traffic, I understand about the larger trucks.

Response: FUDS' concern is that the berm side of the landfill was put in to protect that side of the landfill from overflows from Pacheco Creek. The requirements are that that berm road maintains its elevation. The Army Corps needs to repair any degradation from use of the road.

Q: Is there any data on the degradation of the road during the last year from the North Antenna Field restoration?

A: I do know that they did some repairs to the road, but do not know how significant that work was. That would be a good question for FUDS.

Discussion of Next Steps

The following next steps and future actions were identified for the Project:

- Information on the nursery building construction will soon be distributed.
- Information on construction projects will be provided:
 - To the Hamilton Community Forum list, which reaches 600 people
 - On the Project website
 - To the Hamilton Wetlands e-mail list
 - To affected property owners via mailings
- Project managers will hold a public meeting on Hamilton trail designs once the plans are complete
- A presentation from the Marin-Sonoma Mosquito and Vector Control District on insect cycles and possible abatement techniques and plans was suggested for a future meeting
- Project managers will return to the Hamilton Community Forum about every six months for an update
- Attendees were asked to sign up for the electronic update newsletter via the website at www.hamiltonwetlands.scc.ca.gov.
- Community members are invited to make suggestions on improvements to the website and additional content that would be helpful to have available on the website.
- A celebration event will be held with the fall 2012 breach

Meeting Attendance:

Tanya Albert
Judy Arnold
Pat Balderama
Elvera Berson
Alan Berson
David Brewer
Marucia Britto
Pat Eklund
Marla Fields
Nancy Foster
Marie Hoch
Jerry Kay
Lori Koch
Liz Lewis
Carey Parent (CLE)
MA Parker
Katherine Reid
Laurette Rogers
Robin Sloan
Dorothea von Koch
Tony Williams
Joe Wolff
Ray Wrysinski

Radz Zalewski
Tom Gandesbery, State Coastal Conservancy
Robin Liffmann, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
Ed Keller, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers
Ariel Ambruster, Center for Collaborative Policy
Grace Person, Center for Collaborative Policy

More information about the Project can be found at www.hamiltonwetlands.scc.ca.gov