

**County of Santa Clara**  
**Board of Supervisors**  
Supervisory District Three  
Supervisor Dave Cortese



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BOSD3 08 030111

DATE: March 1, 2011

TO: Board of Supervisors

FROM: 

Dave Cortese  
Supervisor, District 3



George Shirakawa  
Supervisor, District 2

SUBJECT: Policy Recommendations related to the County of Santa Clara Parkland Acquisition Plan: 2011 Update.

**RECOMMENDED ACTION**

Consider recommendations relating to the County of Santa Clara Parkland Acquisition Plan: 2011 Update.

1. Accept status report relating to Parkland Acquisition Plan.
2. Accept the policy recommendations as outlined in the staff report with the following modifications:
  1. The Department should continue to focus its land acquisition role and dollars on ~~regional~~ parklands of Countywide significance;

2. Parklands of Countywide significance include public parks and recreational facilities in urban, suburban and rural areas, particularly in those areas that are park deficient;
  3. The Department should continue and build upon its history of working with partners to acquire and operate a regional system of parks. Specifically, the Department should facilitate an annual Cities meeting to collectively strategize and determine potential and priority for joint projects that could benefit from County acquisition funds and city CIP/O&M funds. Such projects should serve regional needs, encompassing both unincorporated County and incorporated City residents;
  4. To achieve balance in providing ~~urban~~ parks of ~~regional~~ Countywide significance while continuing to provide ~~rural~~ parks with natural resources for recreational purposes, County participation in ~~urban~~ park projects should be based on the level of partnership resources that will leverage County funds ~~in the more expensive urban core~~;
  5. Recognizing that park-deficient urban and suburban areas exist, including those within the County's unincorporated jurisdiction, the County has a role in providing park services to those park-deficient urban and suburban areas that may include acquisition within or in close proximity to these pockets;
  6. The Department should utilize acquisition criteria based on current policy including the policy recommendations as enumerated in 1-5 and update these criteria to include future park-related Board policies as they are adopted.
3. Bring back any other documents, policies or ordinances that are inconsistent with these policy recommendations for discussion by the Board of Supervisors.

## **REASONS FOR RECOMMENDATION**

Approving the following policy recommendations will allow the Board of Supervisors to give clear direction to the Parks and Recreation Department in regards to the acquisition needs in the current state of affairs and allow the policy recommendations to be incorporated into the Acquisition Plan 2011 Update.

## **BACKGROUND**

From the beginning as an idea to preserve green space for the enjoyment and recreation of Santa Clara County residents to its current form, the Parks and Recreation Department has completed great work while responding to the varying needs of its users. The initial focus was understandably on preserving open space and natural resources. In the 50's, 60's and even

through the end of the century, the valley was in a period of great growth and expansion. As acre by acre of farmland was turned into homes, community leaders desired to slow the spread of urbanization by securing large open space preserves for the future enjoyment of urbanites.

Fast forward to 2011, the valley floor has filled out, yet the hills surrounding the valley are not in as great of a danger of development due to a variety of reasons, including open space agencies, Williamson Act Contracts and zoning laws. In the range of public spaces, from pocket parks to open space preserves, the County Parks Department was initially the only agency actively preserving the large rural parks, open spaces, and natural resources that go along with them. However currently, there are other agencies that have taken the charge in preserving open spaces, including MidPeninsula Regional Open Space District, Peninsula Open Space Trust, and the Open Space Authority.

Instead, the current threat to green space is actually on the valley floor in and near urban and suburban areas. According to the Santa Clara County General Plan's third goal for Livable Communities, it is necessary to have "sufficient urban open space and parks to provide opportunities for intensive recreation, leisure activities, and scenic enhancement of urbanized areas." Therefore, it is necessary for the Department to take a renewed look at where its precious resources are needed most. By understanding that the need for open space is still important but not necessarily as urgent, the Department can focus on areas where its return on investment is highest.

By focusing closer to urban areas, the Department can create parks that will give more benefit to county residents, particularly those in park deficient or unincorporated areas. While the size of the parks may be smaller, they will have more intensive uses and may be visited by more residents than the larger regional parks.

Many county departments are shifting their focus from program driven services to client driven services. As detailed above, the Department has successfully hedged against private development in the rural areas surrounding Santa Clara Valley. This programmatic theme was implemented at a time when that threat was very real. In light of limited funding, it is even more important to look at how the county can provide every resident with the level of support that they individually need. The Department has made great strides towards bringing the "Parks to the People" from a recreational programming perspective, including working with SSA to bring underserved clients to events such as Fantasy of Lights and developing new programs to inspire youth to embrace outdoor recreation activities as a means to develop a healthy lifestyle. However there is more that can be done, particularly in regards to acquisition of future parklands.

Currently the section of the population that has the ability to drive to the regional rural parks has a variety of different menu options to choose from, including Grant Ranch, Mt. Madonna, and Upper/Lower Stevens Creek. The section of the population that is fortunate enough to live near an urban county or city park is able to utilize those parks for their recreational needs. Conversely, the section of population that lives in urban areas that are park deficient and do not have the capability to visit the large rural parks are the ones that can benefit the most from the acquisition of new parklands.

There are many other externalities to consider when calculating the return on investment. At a time when the Health and Hospital System is shifting its focus from treatment to prevention, we can look to county parks as an investment in these efforts. Parklands and trails provide free options for healthy activity and exercise. Furthermore, parks in urban areas allow for increased incentives for usage by residents stemming from ease of use and convenience. Additionally, too often, the park deficient urban areas are those occupied by lower income residents who do not have the luxury of driving to regional parks, most likely do not have the disposable income to pay for gym memberships, and probably do not have health insurance, thereby needing to rely on the county for their health needs.

While the environmental benefits of preserving vast swaths of open space are obvious, there are some unintended consequences when those same areas are meant to also serve as recreational opportunities. Being that they are often destination parks with little to no public transportation, they necessitate driving to and from the parks, polluting along the way. On the other hand smaller parks in or near urban areas provide easier access for residents, are more likely to entice park use, and can act as gateways to trails and other parks.

When deciding between adding another parcel to an existing regional park or purchasing a parcel to create a new urban park in an area that is void of green space, the thought must also be considered that the Park Charter Fund is paid for by all taxpayers within the county, not just those in unincorporated rural areas. In order to maintain the balance of parklands, the accessibility of those parks by the people who pay to support the Park Charter Fund must be analyzed.

The county's vision of an "Emerald Necklace" has been realized. It is a worthy goal to now take on the vision of an "Emerald Web" of parks, trails and open spaces across the entire Santa Clara Valley.