

December 5, 2023

Benicia Parks, Recreation & Cemetery Commission
370 East L Street
Benicia CA, 94510
(Via email)

Dear Commissioners:

RE: Parks Trails and Open Space Master Plan – October 2023 Draft.

The Chapter is providing this comment letter for the Commissioners' consideration on the October 2023 Draft of the Parks, Trails and Open Space Master Plan (Master Plan). These comments build upon the comment letter submitted May 1, 2022 and follow the organization of the Master Plan.

Chapter Four – Public Outreach and Engagement

The public outreach efforts look impressive but we were hoping to read the direct input the City received. Did any stakeholder provide written comments following the focus group meetings? Did the public provide written comments following the virtual public input meeting to solicit feedback on amenity needs, the park system and funding priorities? Did the City record the sticky notes on the conceptual maps displayed at the public input workshops? Did the City record the 244 comments received on the Master Plan's website?

We reviewed the City's summary of public comments, but we are interested in knowing which organizations and individuals are interested in the Master Plan, if they had specific suggestions to address in the Master Plan, if arguments or data were used to support their suggestions and how the City took that input into account in preparing the Master Plan. This documentation can be included in the appendix for those who are interested, would respect the commitment made by those who wrote the comment, and would support the transparency of the process to develop the Master Plan.

It is encouraging to learn that the results of the statistically valid survey of 488 Benicia households found that the highest priorities for "Parks and Recreation Facility and Amenity Investments" includes;

- Publicly accessible open spaces with trails and benches; and
- Trees and landscaping.

believes that native plant species should be emphasized in the Master Plan's investments in its open spaces and trees and landscaping. Native plant species enhance the scenic qualities of our parks and open spaces, provide the preferred habitat for wildlife, are adapted to the local climate and soils, and do not rely on the use of pesticides or fertilizers. Native plant species are an aesthetic and sustainable landscaping choice for the City's parks, trails and open spaces.

Chapter Five – Park and Facility Assessment

reviewed the goals and objectives that guide the City's decisions for making improvements to parks, trails, and open spaces. We also referred to the General Plan to understand the City's overarching desires for protection of Benicia's natural resources and its policies affecting parks

and open space areas, which account for 25% of the acreage within the city limits. With that background we offer additional language, shown in underlined text, to incorporate into the Master Plan's goals and objectives.

On page 57, we reviewed Goal 1 for Parks and Park Facilities

Provide a variety of natural, recreational, and cultural experiences that enhance health and enjoyment for a diverse community.

..and it's supporting Objective:

Promote health and well-being by implementing improvements that encourage physical activity, exposure to nature, and positive social interaction.

This objective lists nine improvements for implementation. We believe the following improvement should be added to this list:

Identify opportunities to restore and enhance habitat for native plants and wildlife in our parks and open spaces.

An example of such an opportunity would be enhancing the creek through Steven Armenta Park. Invasive plant species growing in the creek can be replaced with native plants species that can improve its habitat value for local wildlife and reduce soil erosion. This creek enhancement will increase the exposure of park users to nature and help educate park users on the how healthy creeks can improve water quality and biodiversity.

Page 58, we reviewed Goal 3 for Open Space

Preserve open space areas in the City of Benicia to protect and enhance natural resources; provide protective barriers against natural hazards; provide for passive recreation activities; maintain and improve public access; and protect visual quality.

- *Preserve and maintain Lake Herman Regional Park in its natural condition while providing for increased passive recreational opportunities.*
- *Maintain fire breaks in parks adjacent to residences, and in the open space areas, as appropriate.*
- *Preserve mature existing trees and any significant stand of smaller trees during the improvement of parks, trails, and open space.*

According to the General Plan, marshland, riparian forest, grassland, northern coastal scrub and oak woodland are the native plant communities that can be found in the open spaces of Benicia. These plant communities provide habitat for a variety of mammals, birds, and reptiles. Preservation and restoration of these habitats with native plants will promote biodiversity and help sequester carbon. We request this goal be amended to include additional actions for the use of native plants in open spaces based on the City's General Plan policies.

- *Protect and restore native plant habitats found in open space areas.*
- *Use plant species that are native to the area for any planting in park areas that border open space.*

On Page 58, we reviewed Goal 5 for Maintenance and Operations

Manage outdoor assets for the good of all Benicia residents, thereby providing the highest quality of services, operations, and maintenance possible.

...and its supporting objective:

Provide clean, safe, and memorable environments supported by maintenance standards and driven by policies that balance use, intended purpose, and long-term care.

This objective has a list of conditions and standards to achieve proper operation and maintenance of park assets. This list should include avoiding introduction of serious pathogens into native habitats. Starting in 2014, California plant pathologists showed that many plant pathogens in the Phytophthora genus were present in nursery stock being used for habitat restoration, inadvertently introducing these serious pathogens into native habitats. This was effectively degrading rather than restoring habitats. Restoration nurseries are now beginning to produce pathogen-free nursery stock.¹ Any planting in native habitat areas should use pathogen-free nursery stock to protect these habitats. We request the following practice be included under this objective:

Avoid introduction of plant pathogens into native habitats by using pathogen-free nursery stock in any habitat restoration or open-space planting project.

On Page 59, we reviewed the following maintenance and operations objective:

Establish and continue cooperative and coordinated relationships with public agencies and applicable public interest groups.

This objective has a list of actions that target specific entities that can assist the City in achieving its desired level of maintenance and operations. Our members who hike in Benicia open space areas have observed the spread of invasive plant species such as Artichoke thistle (*Cynara cardunculus*), Yellow starthistle (*Centaurea solstitialis*) and Pampas grass (*Cortaderia selloana*). These invasive plant species can be abrasive to human contact, reduce the quality of wildlife habitat, reduce biodiversity and potentially increase risk of wildfires. The City would benefit by adding the following action to this objective:

Coordinate with the County Agriculture Commissioner, the local Weed Management Area, and the California Invasive Plants Council to help manage the spread of invasive plant species and plant pathogens in parks and open space areas.

Chapter Six – Parks Trails and Open Space Plan

Chapter Six contains a “concept plan” for each park in the City that describes proposed improvements by phase. The concept plan for Waterfront Park proposes enhancements to marsh and seasonal wetland habitat. Several other parks contain native plant habitats that should be preserved and enhanced as part of this Master Plan. Please consider adding these native habitat improvements to the following park concept plans:

- Lake Herman Regional Park (Exhibit 03A)
 - *Restore riparian habitat along creeks.*
 - *Enhance wetlands²*
 - *Establish native trees in drainage washes²*
- Southampton Park (Exhibit 09)
 - *Clean Up and Enhance Creek* *Restore riparian habitat along the creek.*
- Steven Armenta Park (Exhibit 13)
 - *Restore riparian habitat along the creek.*

¹ Accreditation to Improve Restoration Program.

² Identified in 1997 Master Plan, Figure 4-2.

On Page 72, the Master Plan includes a description of Benicia State Recreation Area (BSRA) because it “contributes significantly to Benicia’s park and open space”. It is also important to recognize that it hosts the Forrest Deaner Native Plant Botanic Garden (Botanic Garden), which was established by the WJ Chapter in 2004 and has been maintained by volunteers. The Botanic Garden contains examples of the native plant communities found in Solano County and has a demonstration garden for native plants suitable for residential landscaping. We request that the Master Plan text for BSRA be revised to include mention of the Botanic Garden.

Also identified in the 1997 Master Plan, the Benicia State Recreation Area (BSRA) is owned, managed, and maintained by the California Department of Parks and Recreation. Constructed in 1963, this 469-acre recreation area is located along the shores of Southamptton Bay at the western edge of Benicia. Two miles of road provide access for motor vehicles, walkers, and cyclists. BSRA provides fishing and picnicking facilities and is a popular location for outdoor fitness and leisure activities. It hosts the 3.5 acre Forrest Deaner Native Plant Botanic Garden that features the native plant communities found in Solano County. The proximity of the Recreation Area contributes significantly to Benicia’s park and open space, however planned improvements are not the purview of the City. The BSRA was not included in the park assessment or proposed improvements, but is included in the list of available parks, trails and open space in the City of Benicia.

Chapter Seven – Funding Strategy

██████████ who reside in Benicia are aware of the City’s current financial difficulties, which require the Master Plan to consider new strategies to fund park, trail and open space improvements. The following comments are offered to foster continued discussion of these funding strategies for the Master Plan after its adoption:

Partnerships can tap resources of other agencies for our parks, trails and open spaces when these facilities serve the needs of the involved partners. The best example in the past has been the partnership between the City and the Benicia Unified School District to jointly maintain ball fields on school campuses that are open to public use after school hours. The City should consider opportunities to form future partnerships where our parks, trails and open spaces have the potential to be re-purposed to meet the needs of the following entities, while also meeting the needs of Benicia. This Master Plan presents opportunities for potential partnerships with the County of Solano, the Solano Resource Conservation District, and the ██████████

The County of Solano has had in interest in forming a countywide park district that could provide parks, trails and open spaces at a regional scale. In 2020, the Board of Supervisors considered initiating a process to place a measure before the voters to create a countywide park district as authorized by Senate Bill 365, which was authored by Senator Bill Dodd in 2018. The Board suspended action on this process due to the COVID-19 pandemic. ██████████ supports creation of a countywide park district and believes such a district could support implementation of the Master Plan.

If work to establish the district is reinitiated, the City should consider a partnership with the County to include in this district the following regional facilities listed in the Master Plan on page 100:

- Lake Herman Open Space \$2,200,000
- Bay Trail/Carquinez Strait Scenic Loop Trail \$1,900,000
- Bay Area Ridge Trail \$ 750,000

Solano Resource Conservation District (RCD) is a non-regulatory special district works with federal, state, local and non-profit entities to restore Solano County watershed and natural resources to serve multiple

beneficial purposes. Much of their work has been funded by federal and state grants. The Solano RCD website describes examples of projects it has sponsored in other cities in Solano County which include:

- Centennial Park in Vacaville received a state grant to restore the watershed through this 260-acre park by removing invasive vegetation and planting native trees, shrub, forbs and grasses and constructing an asphalt trail.
- Lake Dalwigk is a 44-acre stormwater detention basin in Vallejo that received a state grant to revegetate the park with native plants to improve park aesthetics, provide cover and food for wildlife, capture greenhouse gases and encourage outdoor recreation.
- Alamo Creek Bike Trail in Vacaville received a state grant to construct two demonstration gardens on excess right of way adjacent to the trail to demonstrate the use of native plants for residential landscapes and improve water quality in the creek.
- Glen Cove Waterfront is a 15-acre park in Vallejo that received a grant to remove invasive vegetation, install fencing, and plant native vegetation to stabilize slopes, restore a creek and establish a native plant demonstration garden.

The Master Plan presents a number of opportunities for partnerships with the Solano RCD. These opportunities include projects that can improve wildlife habitat, reduce greenhouse gas emissions, clean water and increase public access to nature. These opportunities can take advantage of Solano RCD's valuable expertise in designing projects that can compete effectively for state and federal grant funds and involve the community. These opportunities in the Master Plan include:

- Restoration of shoreline and wetland areas of the Waterfront Park and Lake Herman Regional Park;
- Restoration of creeks in Southampton Park, Steven Armenta Park and Lake Herman Regional Park; and
- Removal of invasive plant species and development/restoration of native habitat areas adjacent to existing or planned trails.

The Master Plan also presents opportunities for partnership with local non-profit organizations such as [REDACTED]. We operate a small native plant nursery in Vallejo. Our project, Re-Oak Solano County, includes donating native tree saplings to the Benicia Tree Foundation and recruiting volunteers for their tree planting project in the Lake Herman Open Space. [REDACTED] would consider future partnerships to provide plant materials and volunteers for park and open space projects in Benicia that include native plants.

[REDACTED] appreciates the attention the Commission is giving to the Master Plan and thanks the Commission for this opportunity to comment. [REDACTED]