

STAFF REPORT TO THE PLANNING COMMISSION
CASCADE CANYON AND WHITE HILL OPEN SPACE PRESERVES
MANAGEMENT PLAN
FINAL ENVIRONMENTAL IMPACT REPORT

Item No: 6

Owner: Marin County Open Space District

Property Location: The Cascade Canyon Open Space Preserve is located north and west of the Town of Fairfax and the White Hill Open Space Preserve abuts the northern boundary of the Cascade Canyon Preserve.

Planner: Tim Haddad, Environmental Coordinator
James Raives, Senior Open Space Planner

Hearing Date: August 8, 2005

RECOMMENDATION:	Certify Final EIR
APPEAL PERIOD:	N/A
LAST DATE FOR ACTION:	N/A

ACTION

The Marin County Open Space District (District) requests that the Planning Commission review the Final Environmental Impact Report (Final EIR) for Cascade Canyon and White Hill Open Space Preserves (Preserves) Management Plan and consider recommending that the District's Board of Directors certify the Final EIR.

This meeting is not a hearing to receive oral comments on the Final EIR. Pursuant to the County's environmental review procedures, the District circulated that document to allow the public to review and comment on the document's adequacy. This meeting is for the Planning Commission to review the Final EIR and administrative record, and to consider adopting a resolution recommending the District's Board of Directors certify the Final EIR as adequate and complete pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), the State CEQA Guidelines, and County Environmental Review Procedures. After the Planning Commission adopts its recommendation, the District staff will present both the Final Management Plan and Final EIR to the Parks and Open Space Commission to consider recommending that the Board of Directors adopt the Management Plan. The Parks and Open Space Commission will review the Management Plan and Final EIR on August 18, 2005. After both Commissions adopt their recommendations, the Board of Directors will review both the Final EIR and Management Plan.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

In September 2000, the District completed a draft plan to manage the 497-acre Cascade Canyon Open Space Preserve, which is located north and west of the Town of Fairfax, and the 390-acre White Hill Open Space Preserve, which abuts the northern boundary of the Cascade Canyon Preserve. The plan's primary goal is to protect and enhance the Preserves' biological, geologic, hydrologic, and scenic values. The secondary goals are to maintain and enhance public use of the Preserves, reduce the threat of wildfire, and minimize the impacts on the surrounding community.

The plan identifies nine management programs to implement its goals. These programs provide for the management of biological resources, which includes provisions for protecting natural communities, removing exotic species, and preserving habitat for sensitive species. The plan also directs the District's efforts to reduce the threat of wildfires by managing fuel loads within the Preserves. The Fire Management Program includes constructing shaded fuel reduction areas along some fire roads and treating chaparral habitat by cutting vegetation and burning it in piles. This component also provides for coordination with private property owners and the local fire agencies.

The plan also includes a program for the management of trails within the Preserves. This program recommends the construction of two new multiple-use trails in the White Hill Open Space Preserve and eliminates some existing trails in both preserves. This section also includes measures to restore the topography and landscape of areas affected by unrecognized trails (i.e., social or illegally constructed trails not managed by the District). Finally, this program recommends that the District officially recognize (i.e., manage and maintain) the Split Rock and Martha McCormack Trails.

The plan also includes a program for the management of public use of the Preserves. This component provides for the management of uses to protect natural resources, minimize user conflicts, and reduce impacts on adjacent neighborhoods. Finally, the plan includes programs for managing signs and information, enforcing District codes and requirements, and monitoring the implementation of the plan.

BACKGROUND

After completing the draft plan, the District conducted an initial study and determined that the plan has the potential for significant impacts on the environment, and thus requires an EIR. In November 2000, the District prepared and circulated a "Notice of Preparation" to public agencies and interested parties for comment on the scope of the EIR. The District published the Draft EIR in May 2004 and circulated the document to interested parties. Both the Planning Commission and the former Parks, Open Space, and Cultural Commission held public hearings on the DEIR. In addition to the comments received at the hearings, the public sent 21 comment letters. Seven of these letters were from public agencies, three were from interest groups, and eleven were from interested parties. The Final EIR contains these comment letters and the District's responses.

FINAL EIR

Project Modifications

In response to public comments and staff concerns, the District revised the management plan and EIR. The Final EIR describes these changes in the "Response to Comments" section. Some of the more significant changes include: 1) replacing the originally proposed controlled burns in chaparral habitat with cut and pile burning; 2) changing the proposed two-year bicycle-use study to an

ongoing monitoring program; 3) designating the Split-Rock Trail as a recognized trail; 4) requiring an additional assessment for special status species prior to any vegetation clearing or trail construction; and 5) recommending additional monitoring of steelhead habitat in San Anselmo and Cascade Creeks. The Final EIR reviews these changes and concludes that they do not result in impacts that are new or more significant than those considered in the Draft EIR. Therefore, the changes to the plan do not require recirculation of the EIR.

Identified Impacts

The Final EIR identifies 16 potentially significant impacts of the plan. In general, these impacts affect soil erosion, hydrology, vegetation, wildlife, public safety, and visual resources. Additionally, the Final EIR identifies measures to mitigate these impacts so that they are less than significant.

Plan Consistency

The Final EIR indicates that the plan is generally consistent with the goals and policies of the Marin Countywide Plan.

Alternatives

The Final EIR considers a number of alternatives to the proposed project, including the “No-Project Alternative.” These alternatives include the following:

- 1) an alternative that provides for no new activities;
- 2) an alternative that allows for future activities under existing plans;
- 3) an alternative that implements the proposed plan, but adds the construction of two bridges over San Anselmo Creek along the Cascade Canyon Fire Road;
- 4) an alternative that implements the proposed plan without the construction of the two new trails at the north end of the White Hill Open Space Preserve;
- 5) an alternative that implements the proposed plan but limits the new trails at the north end of the White Hill Preserve to hikers and equestrians;
- 6) an alternative that implements the proposed plan but prohibits bicycle and equestrian use of Cascade Fire Road within the Cascade Canyon bottomlands; and
- 7) an alternative that implements the plan with the EIR-recommended mitigation measures.

The Final EIR states that Alternative 4, the No New Trails Alternative, is the environmentally preferable alternative because it would not increase use of the Preserves as much as the other alternatives. However, Alternative 7, the proposed plan including mitigation measures identified in the Final EIR, is preferred because: 1) Alternative 4 does not meet one of the plan's objectives to improve access to the Preserves; and 2) the measures identified in the Final EIR will fully mitigate all significant impacts from the plan.

Response to Comments on the Draft EIR

The Final EIR's response to comments provides two “Master Responses.” The first master response addresses concerns that the Draft EIR lacked a detailed biological assessment of the

Preserves. This response explains that biological data used for the EIR analysis is consistent with CEQA and that a detailed assessment of the habitat in the Preserves is not necessary to evaluate or mitigate the project's effects. However, that response recommends amending the plan to add a habitat assessment of San Anselmo and Cascade Creeks and their adjacent habitats to allow better management of steelhead trout habitat in those streams. The second master response addresses concerns about traffic and safety impacts. Based on these comments, the District conducted an independent traffic study along Sir Francis Drake Boulevard near the north end of the White Hill Preserve. The traffic study concludes that the management plan will not have a significant impact on traffic, parking, or public safety. Master Response 2 summarizes these conclusions and Appendix G of the Final EIR includes the complete study. The response to comments also addresses individual comments on the adequacy of the EIR and the plan.

COMMENTS ON THE FINAL EIR

Consistent with County's environmental review requirements, the District circulated the Final EIR for a 10-day review and comment period. As of the drafting of this report, the comment period is still open and the District has not received any comments on the Final EIR. The District will forward any comments and responses to the Planning Commission prior to its meeting.

CONCLUSION

The District has prepared and processed the Final EIR in full compliance with CEQA, State EIR Guidelines, and County Environmental Review Procedures. The District provided the public with substantial opportunity to participate in the EIR process. The Final EIR provides adequate information and analysis to make an informed decision on the environmental effects from implementation of the project. Therefore, the Final EIR is acceptable for certification as the environmental review for the plan.

RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Planning Commission review and consider the Final EIR and administrative record, and then move to approve the attached Resolution recommending that the District's Board of Directors certify the Cascade Canyon and White Hill Open Space Preserves Management Plan Final EIR as adequate and complete pursuant to CEQA, the State EIR Guidelines and the Marin County Environmental Review Guidelines and Procedures.

- Attachments:
1. Draft Resolution recommending certification
 2. Final EIR (copies distributed on 7/28/05)