



Santa Cruz Bird Club

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Dear Parks Commission:

December 4, 2023

The Santa Cruz Bird Club (507 members) is writing in strong support of Concept B for the redesign of San Lorenzo Park. We recommend restoring the entire Riverlands with native plants to enhance its biodiversity, enrich our community and save maintenance costs. We propose that the restored area be maintained for reflective, nature-based recreation like birding or botanizing and for educational purposes with students being led on walks or science projects by either Bird Club members or our collaborators like the Natural History Museum or the Coastal Watershed Council. Finally, we propose that intrusive human uses like festivals, food-trucks and playing fields be limited to the upper part of the park in order to minimize disturbance to wildlife and the trampling of vegetation.

The Riverlands is a unique habitat because of the coincidence of three factors: annual flooding and the resultant increase in moisture beneficial to wildlife; the presence of a tree canopy due to mature Cottonwoods and Redwoods along stretch of the river and, finally, proximity to the two sandbars that serve as safe nesting and roosting sites for waterfowl, herons, owls and hawks. Due to these three factors the river within Santa Cruz is the third richest site in our county in terms of the total number of bird species which currently stands at 222. Additionally, It is a nesting site for at least 60 species and an important stop for rare, migrating birds which use the river as a flyway. In the last few years, for example, the river has played host to such rarities as the White Wagtail, normally found in Asia. The frequent occurrence of such rarities draws tourists from across the state; an influx that aids our local economy. No other park within our county boasts this combination of features.

We urge the city to utilize this exceptional site by restoring and replacing the lawn with native grasses and plants adapted to the natural cycles of winter floods and summer drought. This would have several benefits: the city would save money on mowing, sowing and replacing a flexible lawn every year; the birdlife would be enhanced due to increased food sources; the space could be used for educational collaborative projects with such entities as the Natural History Museum (on the model of Watsonville Wetlands Watch); residents of the nearby senior housing and office workers would gain a place to sit and enjoy a quiet lunch on benches and, finally, the city would gain a natural green space in its very heart; a distinction not many cities can claim.

Restoration of the Riverlands and its maintenance as a natural area is a more ecologically sound and inclusive use since it serves a larger range of ages than a flexible lawn which would be used primarily by young people playing sports when the Riverlands are not flooded; furthermore, a flexible lawn would require annual maintenance due to winter floods which are likely to get more intense and frequent with Global Warming. Finally, a flexible lawn would fragment the narrow space of the Riverlands and games held on it will inevitably spill over into the restored portion of the habitat, causing lasting damage. Festivals are equally damaging but can very easily be held in the upper park with food-trucks parking on Dakota Street, as they did quite successfully during this year's Earth Day celebrations.

We urge the Parks Commission, therefore, to choose Option B for the full, and unfragmented restoration of the Riverlands with ecologically appropriate native plant species which provide food and shelter for native birds and wildlife.

Sincerely,

Lisa Sheridan, Santa Cruz Bird Club President

Shantanu Phukan, Santa Cruz Bird Club Conservation Sub-committee