Off-Agenda Memorandum

Date: December 17, 2019

To: Honorable Members of the Board of Supervisors
   Jeffrey V. Smith, County Executive

From: Don Rocha, Director, Parks and Recreation Department

Subject: Off Agenda Report on Park Acquisition and Development Timelines

At the October 8, 2019 meeting of the Board of Supervisors (Items No. 10 and 31, considered concurrently), during discussion relating to the Fairgrounds and Fairgrounds Management Corporation, the Board directed Administration to provide an off-agenda report providing a summary of the process for acquiring park land and the timeline to activate it for public use.

Executive Summary

As discussed below, the timeline between land acquisition and public opening varies as a result of multiple, property-specific factors. The examples provided in this memorandum demonstrate the gap between acquisition and opening may vary greatly depending upon the property. These variances are often related to the purpose behind the acquisition, which may serve to establish a new park or to expand an existing park or open space. Alternatively, the acquisition may function within a wider, long-term strategy to create linkages between parks, preserves, and/or open spaces.

When the Board of Supervisors directs Parks staff to proceed with a land acquisition, the County is acquiring these properties for a “public park purpose.” This land designation creates protections and restrictions that differ from other, less restrictive County-owned designations. Although parkland may not be immediately “open,” it is acquired to allow the County to plan for future natural area protection and/or public access within an expanding, and sustainable, regional system of parks, trails, and open space.

Lands acquired for a public park purpose that are not immediately accessible to the public are classified as Natural Areas in the Strategic Plan. Intermittent, limited access to Natural Areas is provided in the form of guided hikes, which offer the public the opportunity to visit the property while also creating an opportunity for the County to highlight the importance of Natural Area lands.

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Discussion
The Parks and Recreation Department (Department) Acquisition Plan Update (adopted by the Board of Supervisors in 2012) provides direction on how the County will balance its role of providing regional outdoor recreation and interpretation opportunities in a variety of landscapes that represent natural resource diversity while also providing, over time, strong interconnectivity between an urban population and regional parks. The plan’s strategic focus is on acquiring regionally significant parkland and trail corridors while enhancing partnerships to acquire properties which offer a variety of outdoor recreational opportunities in response to the needs of a growing population. Several factors are considered in the evaluation of acquisition opportunities. Some key considerations include the potential to add to the existing mosaic of parkland, the ability to expand parks towards a logical boundary, and the potential to create landscape linkages between parks, preserves, and dedicated open space. These linkages may provide corridors for wildlife movement and/or close trail gaps to provide new recreational access for visitors. Fulfilling these multiple objectives ensures resiliency and sustainability of parks and open space for this and future generations. The Department must be both strategic and tactical to work within these parameters.

The Department land acquisition strategies focus on working with willing sellers. Therefore, each potential land acquisition must be approached as a “piece” of the overall strategic “puzzle” so individual parcels may not immediately be planned and opened for public access. Multiple considerations affect the gap between the time a property is acquired and the time it is open to the public. These include property size, complexity of property management, and proximity to an existing park vs. isolation/separation from an existing park boundary. Staff must also complete a planning process involving regulatory assessments such as CEQA. Practical short-term and long-term needs for staffing, property cleanup/maintenance, capital development and other considerations must also be addressed prior to public opening. Acquired properties are dedicated by the Board of Supervisors for a “public park purpose” at the time of acquisition, regardless of any planned opening to the public. This designation provides both protections and restrictions that limit allowable interim and long-term uses. In some cases, properties remain closed to the public pending the acquisition of neighboring or associated properties. Once the other properties are acquired, public ownership of the multiple contiguous properties allows the Department to implement regional trail connections and/or open space land connectivity to other public lands that were not previously available.

Considering all this, the following examples of parkland acquisition reflect the diversity of conditions that accompany opportunities. Some properties open quickly while others may take decades requiring additional work before they can safely be open to the public. Some properties remain closed to public access for the foreseeable future, while others may be accessed through pre-scheduled, Department-supervised programs (e.g. docent tours).

Examples of Parkland Acquisition and Public Opening

The Coyote Canyon acquisition comprises 2,790 acres adjacent to Anderson Lake and Coyote Lake-Harvey Bear Ranch County Parks (and Henry Coe State Parks). This property was added to Coyote Lake – Harvey Bear Ranch County Parks following its purchase on April 29, 2016. Planning for interim access to a portion of the property was adopted by the Board of Supervisors on December 10, 2019; and the Department anticipates public access in Spring 2021.

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The *Sulphur Springs Ranch* was acquired on October 10, 2012 and comprises 1,158 acres adjacent to Joseph D. Grant County Park. This property is currently being planned for public access as an amendment to the previously adopted Joseph D. Grant Master Plan and is targeted for opening to the public in 2022.

The *Rancho San Vicente* property was purchased on October 30, 2009. It contains 966 acres located adjacent to Calero County Park. The property was opened to the public in March 2018. Planning for this property was included in the Calero County Park Trails Master Plan adopted by the Board in 2013. Between 2009 and 2018, the property was not accessible to the general public except through scheduled, guided tours.

The *Rancho Cañada del Oro* property was purchased on February 14, 2003 and added to Calero County Park. The property was opened to the public in April 2004. A deed restriction required the property to be open within 1 year of transfer to the County, and its location situated adjacent to the existing boundary of Calero, allowed the Department to streamline the planning process.

The *Nielson* property, comprising 390 acres, was purchased January 2, 1997 and became part of Mt. Madonna County Park. This property is not currently open to the public. While a master plan was completed for Mt. Madonna in 2017, the focus of that plan was limited to the core areas of the park and facilities (campgrounds, visitor center, day use areas, group areas, etc.) along Pole Line Road. Further planning will be necessary to open this property to public access, as well as other potential acquisitions to locally connect regional trails and open space areas.

The *Bear Ranch* property was purchased on January 8, 1997 and added 2,930 acres to Coyote Lake County Park. Per a term of the purchase agreement, the greatly expanded park was renamed Coyote Lake-Harvey Bear Ranch County Park. It was opened to the public in May 2005 as part of the Coyote Lake-Harvey Bear Ranch Master Plan implementation.

The *Mendoza Ranch* property, comprising 700 acres, was purchased February 3, 1997, and added to Coyote Lake – Harvey Bear Ranch County Park. It was also opened to the public May 2005 as part of the Coyote Lake-Harvey Bear Ranch Master Plan implementation.

**Properties Strategically Acquired to Improve Connectivity**

As mentioned above, there are occasions where properties are opportunistically acquired from willing sellers as part of a planned regional trail and/or open space connection. The lands under this category are classified as Natural Areas in the Strategic Plan and are managed to preserve, protect, enhance and restore natural habitats and processes. Natural Areas may not have targeted public opening dates until further acquisitions can be completed to achieve the connectivity goals of a particular Natural Area.

Two examples of Natural Area lands include Clark Canyon (Mt. Madonna County Park) and Melchior (Uvas Reservoir). The *Clark Canyon* property was acquired in partnership with Peninsula Open Space Trust (POST) in November 2009 and the *Melchior* property was acquired in October 2014 in partnership with Santa Clara Valley Open Space Authority (OSA). Both properties are examples of strategic investments from partners. The properties were purchased from willing sellers with the goal of achieving regional trail connectivity and protection of open space areas.

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