

**TO:** PARKS AND RECREATION COMMISSION

**FROM:** COMMUNITY SERVICES AND PUBLIC WORKS DEPARTMENTS

**DATE:** 6/27/17

**SUBJECT:** UPDATE ON THE BAYLANDS NATURE CENTER SIGNAGE INTERPRETIVE PLAN.

## **RECOMMENDATION**

Information only, staff presents plan for signage and other interpretive elements on the deck of the Lucy Evans Baylands Nature Interpretive Center and adjacent trails.

## **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

Staff seeks input from the Commission on the Baylands Nature Center Signage Interpretive Plan. The City of Palo Alto contracted with the design firm S2 Associates, to develop an interpretive plan, outdoor exhibit labels, and other interpretive elements for the exterior deck of the Lucy Evans Nature Interpretive Center (Nature Center), and to plan these signs within the context of future interpretation on the adjacent boardwalk and nearby trails.

Over the next few months, staff and S2 Associates will be responsible for developing, writing label-copy, designing, and managing the fabrication and installation of the interpretive signs for the deck of the Baylands Nature Center. Staff will seek grant funding for interpretive signs and elements for the Baylands Boardwalk and nearby trails.

## **BACKGROUND**

### **The Project**

The Baylands Nature Center Signage Interpretive Plan (the Plan) is the first step in providing exterior interpretive exhibits on the deck of the Nature Center following the renovations completed in April 2017. Among other improvements, the renovations provided “signage railings” to mount the signs and interactive elements.

Funded through the City of Palo Alto’s Capital Improvement Fund Project AC-14001 (CIP), the Plan encompasses approximately two miles of trails from the boat dock west along San Francisquito Creek Trail to the Bay trail and then north to Cooley Landing Education Center in East Palo Alto. The City of Palo Alto owns the Baylands Preserve up to Cooley Landing.

### **The Lucy Evans Baylands Nature Interpretive Center**

Built in 1969, the Nature Center is one of the first nature interpretive centers situated next to the San Francisco Bay. Perched on pilings at the edge of the salt marsh, it includes a boardwalk leading a quarter mile across the marsh to open water and a panoramic view of San Francisco Bay. The Nature Center offers various programs and activities such as nature walks, workshops, an ecology laboratory, and displays of tidelands phenomena, flora and fauna. The City and its partners provide hands-on standards-based curriculum at the Center to more than 3,000 elementary school students from over 30 schools and more than 80,000 visitors to the marsh annually.

The salt marsh itself is a popular destination for hikers, bicyclists and joggers who use the 15 miles of trails, and there is access to the water nearby for small non-motorized craft, wind surfing, kayaking, canoeing and paddle boarding.

The Nature Center and Boardwalk are undergoing renovation and restoration. The 865-foot-long boardwalk is structurally deficient and was closed to the public in 2014. The Boardwalk will be rebuilt in 2019 to increase structural integrity and to improve access for people with disabilities. The Nature Center renovations, completed in April 2017, included replacement of decking, railing, fascia repair, structure framing members (as needed), exterior wood siding, flooring refinish, exterior lighting replacement, electrical panel upgrade, fire sprinkler heads replacement, piping and conduit repairs, restroom and accessibility upgrades.

## **DISCUSSION**

The Plan reinforces the big idea: *this spot on the shore of the San Francisco Bay is special and it takes a lot to keep it that way.* We can hope visitors read, absorb, and articulate every piece of information provided on the individual signs but in reality, most visitors walk away with two to three points. The Plan focuses on articulating the take-away messages to establish a framework for the signage content and for the proposed layout for the interpretive sites.

The Plan includes a list of interpretive messages and interactives or physical interpretive elements with a map showing locations. These messages focus on what visitors can observe from the relative position on the deck, boardwalk, or trail. Subject matter ranges from the history of the marsh and the interpretive center, to the components and phenomena of the salt marsh biome. They include the wildlife that frequent the marsh, the creeks and rivers that feed the bay/marsh, the effects of geography and climate on the marshes of the bay, and the effects of civilization's infrastructure in shaping the marsh we know today.

The Plan provides concept-level illustrations as examples of trail signs, estimates the number of signs and interactives located on the trails, and estimates their cost. Guided by the *Design Guidelines for the Palo Alto Baylands Nature Preserve* and the *Smithsonian Guidelines for Accessible Exhibition Design*, the Plan calls for high-pressure laminate interpretive signs and small interactive elements to be mounted directly to the railing caps on the Nature Center deck. Approximately 66 feet of railings have been renovated to allow installation of signage and small interactives. Approximately 22 signs will fit on the surface of the cap-rails and will be less than 9" high. In addition, there are sites for vertical signs/sculptures/interactives also located on the deck.

The CIP has sufficient funding to complete the final design, fabrication, and installation of the signage and other elements for only the Nature Center Deck. However, there are not sufficient funds for signage and other interpretation on the Boardwalk, scheduled for reconstruction in September of 2018. In addition, the interpretation on the San Francisquito Creek Trail and the portion of the Bay Trail north of the San Francisquito Creek Trail to Cooley Landing is insufficient. The strategy to fund appropriate levels of interpretation for the Boardwalk has been to seek grant funding for the Boardwalk and adjacent trails, and to link the Cooley Landing Education Center operated by East Palo Alto and the Nature Center, operated by Palo Alto as a means of improving access and relationships between these communities. Staff will seek funding through California State Parks grants. These goals of improving access, interpretation,

and community relationships will improve the opportunity for grant awards.

The diverse array of interpretive messages proposed for the area includes historic, cultural, infrastructure, natural history, conservation and land-use information. By looking at interpretive messaging over a two-mile trail, it has allowed the plan to spread the broad array of take away messages to be located where they are meaningful to the visitor. This process allows the planning of the interpretive elements for the Nature Center deck to align with future signage for the nearby trails. This planning effort dovetails with other preserve-wide interpretive planning underway as part of the Baylands Comprehensive Environmental Management Plan. Future signage located on trails would follow the preserves standards and be mounted on posts as called out in the *Design Guidelines for the Palo Alto Baylands Nature Preserve*.

The plan envisions two interpretive elements called out as public art, one on the Boardwalk and one near Cooley Landing. When funded, these installations would be designed to engage the public in site-specific phenomena similar to installations at the Emeryville Shore Line or Pier 15 in San Francisco. The Public Art Commission in collaboration with the Community Services Department would manage the design and installation of the public art interpretive elements.

After the Park and Recreation Commission and the Architectural Review Board review the Interpretive Plan, staff and the Consultant will write text for signage label copy, develop graphic design concept and develop design concepts for signage mounts and interactives or physical interpretive elements.

## **POLICY IMPLICATIONS**

Funding is insufficient for appropriate levels of interpretation on the Boardwalk and the adjacent trails to the Nature Center. To fill this critical funding gap, staff will be seeking grants through California State Parks. City Policy requires Department and City Manager approval for these grants and some grants require a supporting resolution by Council.

The proposed recommendations are consistent with Policy C-26 of the Community Services element of the Comprehensive Plan that encourages maintaining park facilities as safe and healthy community assets; and Policy C-22 that encourages new community facilities to ensure adaptability to the changing needs of the community.

The City of Palo Alto requires architectural review of all exterior signs. The Project is categorically exempt under the California Environmental Quality Act.

## **ATTACHMENTS**

The proposed Baylands Nature Center Signage Interpretive Plan is attached.

## **PREPARED BY**

John Aikin  
Community Services Senior Program Manager  
City of Palo Alto