

**TO: PARKS AND RECREATION COMMISSION**  
**FROM: DAREN ANDERSON DEPARTMENT: COMMUNITY SERVICES**  
**DATE: MAY 25, 2021**  
**SUBJECT: FOOTHILLS NATURE PRESERVE UPDATE**

**RECOMMENDATION**

This is an informational report.

**BACKGROUND**

On [November 2, 2020](#), City Council passed the following motion regarding Foothills Nature Preserve ([Minutes](#)):

- A. Open Foothills Park to the general public by removing limits on non-residents, while maintaining the maximum capacity of 1,000 persons and providing residents first access to reservations for all facilities.
- B. Amend or delete outdated and duplicative [municipal] code language.
- C. For the first 90 days, temporarily limit the capacity to 750 people at any one time.
- D. Return to Council and the Parks and Recreation Commission with proposals for fee, capacity, and park management/environmental integrity studies; and
- E. Direct staff to use the renaming process to consider renaming Foothills Park to Foothills Nature Preserve.

Foothills Nature Preserve opened to the general public on December 17, 2020. On January 26, 2021 ([Minutes](#)), the Parks and Recreation Commission (PRC) discussed several items related to Foothills Nature Preserve that were referred to them by City Council (fees, discounts, rules, and enforcement policies). Included in this discussion was a concern that the pending ordinance and emergency ordinance scheduled for February 1, 2021 City Council Consent Calendar (attached to [Agenda Item Number 3](#)) did not include an option for an annual pass, which could limit frequent park users from visiting the park if they must pay a daily entrance fee each time they visit. The PRC also discussed the limitation on number of visitors allowed in the park at one time, which the emergency ordinance limited to 400 people, not to exceed a maximum of 500 people.

On February 1, 2021 ([Minutes](#)), City Council approved the ordinance and emergency ordinance for a \$6 vehicle entry fee and visitor limit of 400 people at one time, not to exceed 500 people for Foothills Nature Preserve.

On February 11, 2021, the PRC held a special meeting to discuss an annual pass option and the visitor capacity limit for Foothills Nature Preserve ([Minutes](#)). On February 22 ([Staff Report](#) and [Minutes](#)), City Council adopted an ordinance to change the name of Foothills Park to Foothills Nature Preserve, established an annual pass including several discounts and fee waivers for entry to Foothills Nature Preserve, adjusted the visitor limit to Foothills Nature Preserve, and identified groups (e.g. visitors with reservations in Towle Campground) who do not count toward the visitor

limit. Staff began collecting vehicle entrance fees for weekends and holidays on Saturday, February 27, 2021.

On February 23, 2021 ([Minutes](#)), the PRC reviewed and discussed a range of Foothills Nature Preserve Daily/Annual Entrance Fee and Visitor Limit policy considerations. This included some policy guidelines that had been recently adopted by City Council but had not previously been commented on by the PRC. The PRC agreed to support some guidelines, while referring additional details back to the Foothills Nature Preserve Ad Hoc Committee for additional assessment and follow-up recommendation.

On March 23, 2021 ([Staff Report](#) and [Minutes](#)), the PRC discussed several Foothills Nature Preserve policies and voted unanimously (6-0, 1 absent) to recommend that Council adopt an ordinance to amend the Municipal Fee Schedule to include several new vehicle entry fees and discounts for Foothills Nature Preserve, including new fees for medium and large vehicles/buses, free entry on six specified days per year, free passes to be distributed at libraries; and free entry for student field trips and all fourth-grade students; and direct staff to permanently remove the nine hillside BBQs at Foothills Nature Preserve to help improve fire safety.

On May 10, 2021, City Council ([Staff Report](#)) approved the Parks and Recreation Commission's March 23 recommendation. The ordinance changes take affect 31 days after the second reading (June 24, 2021).

## **DISCUSSION**

### **Foothills Nature Preserve Visitation**

From January through April 2021, there were approximately 124,000 visitors to Foothills Nature Preserve. During that same time period in 2020, there were approximately 29,000 visitors. The historical average (the years 2017 to 2019) of visitors from January to April is approximately 42,000. The 2021 visitation increased 322% compared with 2020, and 193% compared to the historical average.

In January 2021, while entrance to the preserve was free, there were approximately 42,000 visitors. This is 321% higher than the historical average of visitors in January. In March and April, after the vehicle entrance fee was implemented (staff began collecting vehicle entrance fees on weekends starting on February 27), there were approximately 27,000 visitors per month. The visitation in March and April was a 125% higher than the historical average.

From January through April 2021, approximately 13,000 vehicles entered the preserve on the weekends (12,101 were daily fee paid entrances, 725 were annual pass entries, and 243 were free entrances). Vehicles with ADA placards, drivers with a valid student ID, persons with veteran/active military status may enter the preserve for free. Annual pass entries represent approximately 5.5% of total visitation.

Visitation continues to be heavily weighted towards the weekends with 58.8% of visitation taking place on weekends and holidays, which is very similar with historic visitation trends.

From January through April 2021, there have been 533 visitors turned away from entering the preserve because they had dogs with them on weekends and holidays (dog turn-aways). During this same time period in 2020, there were 47 dog turn-aways. This is an increase of 1,034%. In 2020, there were 523 dog turn-aways for the entire year. The historical average number of dog turn-aways for January through April is 26.

Foothills Nature Preserve entrance has been closed to entry due to being at the visitor capacity limit (currently set at 500 visitors/200 vehicles at any one time) on 16 days in 2021, with multiple closures occurring on some weekend days. The preserve has not reached capacity since Easter weekend on April 5, 2021.

Park Ranger Activity

From January through April 2021, there have been 15 calls for service (examples include medical calls, missing hikers, and accidents on Page Mill Rd.) for Park Rangers at Foothills Nature Preserve. This is an increase of 50% from the same period in 2020 (10 calls). And an increase of 15% from the historical average where the average is 13 calls for service.

Park Rangers had approximately 202 contacts for parking violations in Foothills Nature Preserve and Pearson Arastradero Preserve in the first four months of 2021 (175 parking violation warnings and 27 parking citations). Historically, Rangers issue fewer than 9 parking citations per year.

**4 MONTH COMPARISONS (JANUARY-APRIL)**

	<b>2021</b>	<b>2020</b>	<b>2017-2019 (Average)</b>	<b>^ in 2021 from 2020</b>	<b>^ in 2021 over 2017-19 Avg.</b>
<b>Visitors</b>	124k	29k	42k	322%	193%
<b>Dog Turnaways</b>	533	47	26	1,034%	1950%
<b>Service Calls</b>	15	10	13	50%	15%

**WEEKEND VEHICLE ENTRY COUNT SINCE START OF ENTRY FEE**

	<b>\$6 Entry Fee Paid</b>	<b>Annual Pass</b>	<b>Fee Waiver</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Vehicles</b>	12,101	725	243	13,069
<b>% of Total</b>	92.5%	5.5%	2%	-

Environmental Monitoring & Data Collection

The PRC has expressed the importance of protecting the natural environment of Foothills Park, especially during this period of increased visitation. They have advocated for environmental monitoring and data collection to help guide policy aimed towards protecting the natural environment and wildlife.

Grassroots Ecology has been monitoring the environmental impact of the opening of Foothills Nature Preserve with respect to three different measures: trail widening, introduction of invasive species and impact on rare plant species in the park. Following is the most recent information on environmental impact:

- There has been trail widening on the Chamise Trail that connects from Vista Point to the lake, and the upper Coyote Trail. The widening is likely happening due to people stepping off the trail for passing. It has damaged some of the adjacent vegetation. The damage is limited to the narrow portions of the trail.
- It is too early to assess the invasive species impact as several of the target species would not have germinated yet.
- There does not appear to be any damage to the rare plant *dirca occidentalis* in the preserve.

Grassroots Ecology will continue to monitor, assess, and report any environmental impacts to City staff on a quarterly basis.

Open Space staff responded to the early observations of off-trail activity by installing temporary fencing and signage, which has been effective in keeping visitors out of sensitive areas. Open Space staff will continue to place brush and downed tree limbs in areas where trail widening has occurred. Open Space and Public Works staff completed a project to improve the overflow parking lot at Pearson Arastradero Preserve, which may help ease some of the visitation and parking challenges at Foothills Nature Preserve. The overflow parking lot, which can hold approximately 22 vehicles, opened in April 2021.

#### Foothills Nature Preserve Stakeholder Group

In January 2021, the City Manager assembled a stakeholder group (consisting of representatives from Grassroots Ecology, Friends of Foothills Park, the Environmental Volunteers, Stanford University Haas Center for Public Service, Jasper Ridge Biological Preserve, Los Alto Hills, and the Chair and Vice Chair of the Parks and Recreation Commission) to identify and recommend improvements in the following areas at Foothills Nature Preserve:

- People: Education and programs, interpretation, docents, volunteers, public engagement, etc.
- Environment: Habitat and wildlife, impact monitoring and mitigation, regional outreach, and sustainability.
- Infrastructure and Funding: Safety, trails, traffic, parking, signage, preserve entry points, and funding for programs and infrastructure improvements.

The stakeholder group collaborated with volunteers to create a brief video to help educate visitors on the principles of Leave No Trace, how to recreate in Foothills Park responsibly, and how to prepare and make the most of a trip to the preserve. The video will be presented at the May 25 Parks and Recreation Commission meeting, and then made available on the City website and distributed widely to help spread the important message.

The stakeholder group is also working on establishing a Trail Ambassador Program through a partnership with the Environmental Volunteers (EVs). The goal of the Trail Ambassador Program is to provide volunteer-led engagement of Foothill Nature Preserve visitors, expanding their knowledge and sparking interest in the preserve as well as providing helpful information and resources, and encouraging environmental stewardship. The EVs have 18 trail ambassadors signed up to participate in the program. Since January 2021, the EVs have a volunteer docent working at Foothills Nature Preserve on Saturdays from 10am to 2pm. The docent sets up a nature discovery table at Boronda Lake and contacts about 100 people a day. The discovery table features displays relevant to foothills ecology.

A third initiative of the stakeholder group is a list of infrastructure improvements aimed at protecting the habitat and improving visitor safety and experience. Examples of some of the proposed improvements include split rail fencing to help encourage visitors to stay on trail, creating a pedestrian pathway throughout the preserve to allow visitors to avoid walking on the roadway, better defined parking spaces, adding crosswalks and speed bumps to improve pedestrian safety, and additional signage.

Staff is working on developing a conceptual plan set, cost estimates, and funding source for the proposed infrastructure improvements which will be shared with the Parks and Recreation Commission for their feedback once it is developed.

#### **TIMELINE**

June 2021	Open Space staff will remove the 9 hillside BBQs
June 24, 2021	Adopted ordinance approved by Council on May 10 takes effect
August 2021	Parks and Recreation Commission review Foothills Nature Preserve stakeholder group's proposed infrastructure improvements