



DATE: March 19, 2025

TO: Tree Advisory Committee

FROM: Andrew Trippel, Planning Manager

SUBJECT: Recommendation to the City of Petaluma Tree Advisory Committee to Receive Staff and Applicant Presentations and Conduct a Study Session to Provide Nonbinding Comments and Further Direction on a Conceptual Design Proposal for the Petaluma River Park Located on the McNear Peninsula and 500 Hopper Street, APNs 007-181-002, 136-010-023, 007-171-023, and 136-010-024, City Record No. PLPJ-2025-0003

RECOMMENDATION

It is recommended that the Tree Advisory Committee conduct a study session to receive presentations from staff and applicants regarding a conceptual design proposal for the Petaluma River Park, provide comments and feedback on the conceptual design, and respond to discussion topics recommended by City staff to provide further direction to the Petaluma River Park Foundation (Foundation).

BACKGROUND

Project Context

The [Petaluma River Park Project](#) (the project) is a project of the [Petaluma River Park Foundation](#). The project site is comprised of approximately 35 acres, including a 24-acre peninsula property (APN 007-181-002 and 136-010-023) on the south side of the McNear Channel and east of the City-owned Steamer Landing Park and an approximately 10.8-acre portion of property fronting a portion of Hopper Street (APN 007-171-023 and 136-010-024) on the north side of the McNear Channel and east of Shamrock Materials, Inc.

The project is in the heart of Petaluma, northeast of Downtown. Surrounding natural features include the Petaluma River and McNear Channel. Uses in immediate proximity to the project site include industrial, warehousing, multi-family, commercial, and office uses, and the Downtown Petaluma Sonoma Marin Area Rail Transit (SMART) station is located within ¼-mile of the site. The project site is within walking or biking distance of commercial retail goods and services, restaurants, entertainment uses, a museum, and public gathering areas. The Petaluma Regional Library and Fairgrounds are just over ½-mile northeast of the project site.

The Petaluma River Park is open to the public and accessible from Copeland Street. Park users are supported by limited site improvements approved by the City of Petaluma. These improvements include formalizing trails onsite (approved under Building Permit BLGR-2022-0001) and installing Huru, a steel art sculpture by Mark di Suvero that is on a long-term loan to the Petaluma River Park Foundation from a local family (approved for installation under Building Permit BLDC-2023-0025).

Project Description Summary

The Petaluma River Park's conceptual design envisions an inclusive, nature-forward, and culturally rich public space. It describes the general characteristics of future development, including playgrounds, picnic areas, sports courts, a beach, and landscape installations consisting of trees and other native, climate-resilient species. The conceptual design explores how the park will benefit the community through site design and community programming, and it considers the restoration, enhancement, and climate change adaptation components to fulfill the project's "light on the land" philosophy.

The Concept Plan is driven by three overarching design goals, which address what the project plans to do and why it plans to do it:

1. **Connect for Success.** The park's new trails and bridge will provide key connections to the city of Petaluma, the region, bus and train networks, the Bay Area Ridge Trail, and other major trail systems. Together, these park features will improve active transportation routes and access to the Petaluma River for locals and people across the North Bay.
2. **Nurture Nature.** Community voices were clear: Petaluma River Park should be a park that protects and restores nature. This is a rare opportunity to create a natural refuge in the heart of an urban setting.
3. **Uplift Community.** The goal is to create a welcoming, shared place for everyone to gather, enjoy time together, and celebrate the richness of our community and varied cultures.

An overview of these components of the Conceptual Design Proposal is provided below.

Connect for Success

The proposed conceptual design includes the following:

- A bridge over the McNear Channel to connect the site's two properties.
- Multi-use and walking trails connecting the site to regional systems, including the Bay Area Ridge Trail, SMART Pathway, and Petaluma River Trail.
- Aquatic launching and landing sites to connect the site to the San Francisco Bay Area Water Trail.
- Recreational and other amenities, including a community center, sport and multi-use courts, flex fields, playgrounds, outdoor amphitheater, pavilion, community garden, food truck area, and restroom facilities.
- Surface parking along the Park's Hopper Street entrance.
- Wayfinding and educational signage throughout the Park and adjacent areas.
- Visual art installations throughout the site.

Community Programming

The Petaluma River Park will provide various community benefits through a mixture of formally and informally programmed areas. At a high level, community programming components are anticipated to include:

- School district and community-based organization environmental education programs and hands-on community stewardship opportunities facilitated by the Project's location and focus on restoration, enhancement, and climate change adaptation improvements.
- Cultural and historic educational programs and information.
- Individual and group gathering and recreational opportunities facilitated by site features such as picnic areas, community center, sport and multi-use courts, flex fields, and playgrounds.
- Performances and programs facilitated by site features such as the proposed community center, pavilion, amphitheater, and flex fields.

Restoration, Enhancement, and Climate Change Adaptation

The Concept Plan reflects the community's desire to maintain and enhance the natural features of the Project site, devoting approximately 80% of the Park's acreage to restoration and enhancement of native plant and wildlife habitat and climate change adaptation. Restoration, enhancement, and climate adaptation features include the following:

- Restoration of two acres of tidal marsh.
- Preservation of two additional acres of tidal marsh that will allow habitat migration with increasing sea level rise.
- Restoration, enhancement, and preservation of an approximately 1.4-acre vernal pool.
- Restoration, enhancement, and preservation of the Park's shoreline through biotechnical bank stabilization.
- Tree and native plantings within restoration areas and areas programmed for public access (e.g., along multi-use and walking trails, within the proposed parking area, etc.).

Review Process

Based on the information provided in the conceptual design proposal, required Planning entitlements will include a General Plan Amendment and Rezoning, for which the review authorities are the Planning Commission (recommendation) and City Council (decision), and the Site Plan and Architectural Review, for which the review authority is Planning Commission (decision). Because the project is in its conceptual design phase, applications for required Planning entitlements have not been formally submitted to the City of Petaluma for review and processing. Rather, the project will receive feedback, direction, and comments from the City of Petaluma's Committees, Commissions, and Boards (CCBs) through a series of study sessions.

The City's CCBs play a vital role in ensuring that projects achieve City goals and that projects presented for formal review authority approvals and permits are well-informed and reflect a range of perspectives. Study sessions also provide a forum for public members to comment, garnering meaningful community feedback related to topic-specific areas. For this project, community input received through City-sponsored public meetings will augment a significant and robust community

engagement process project leaders have implemented over the past 1+ years. This early-stage review will allow the Petaluma River Park Foundation to submit a formal application that reflects the goals and priorities of the City of Petaluma and its residents. The project is scheduled to be reviewed at various Study Sessions by the following CCBs:

- January 23, 2025: **Public Art Committee (PPAC)**
- February 13, 2025: **Senior Advisory Committee (SAC)**
- February 26, 2025: **Recreation, Music, and Parks Committee (RMPC)**
- March 5, 2025: **Pedestrian and Bicycle Advisory Committee (PBAC)**
- March 19, 2025: **Tree Advisory Committee (TAC)**
- March 25, 2025: **Planning Commission (PC)** and **Historic and Cultural Preservation Committee (HCPC)**
- TBD: **City Council (CC)**

Following these study sessions, the project will refine the conceptual design to incorporate collective feedback and key recommendations shared by the CCBs and the community. It anticipates submitting formal applications for review and processing in 2025. The required Planning entitlements [General Plan Amendment, Rezoning, and Site Plan and Architectural Review (SPAR)] are subject to discretionary review; therefore, the project will be subject to environmental review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA)¹. CEQA review will commence after entitlement applications are submitted.

Regulatory Context

City policies and regulations to which the proposed project will be subject are contained in a variety of regulatory and policy documents, including but not limited to the following:

- **2025 General Plan and Central Petaluma Specific Plan (CPSP)**
- **River Access and Enhancement Plan and Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan**
- **2013 SmartCode**
- **Petaluma Municipal Code (PMC)** and **Implementing Zoning Ordinance (IZO)**, as applicable

Community Engagement

The Petaluma River Park Foundation has independently conducted community engagement with a variety of populations and groups, including, but not limited to, local Indigenous peoples, Latino/Latinx, Black, Asian, and other BIPOC communities, people with disabilities, unsheltered individuals, elders, youth, and LGBTQIA2+ communities. The Foundation's community engagement efforts provided a diverse range of opportunities for members of the public to share their visions for the Park, including workshops where Community Park Designers and technical experts worked alongside the Foundation's design team to provide feedback on topics such as restoration, recreation, health, arts and culture, urban planning, education, and community

¹ The term "CEQA clearance" refers generally to the environmental review process required by CEQA, which can take many forms (e.g. categorical and statutory exemptions, mitigated negative declaration, environmental impact report, etc).

engagement. The overall community engagement strategy employed by the Foundation seeks to create a space that fosters equity, accessibility, and shared stewardship, informing the Conceptual Proposal, which is now being presented to the City's various CCBs for additional review and feedback. Community engagement will continue to play a key role in the overall planning process for the Petaluma River Park.

Project Timeline

The Petaluma River Park Foundation's timeline for the project includes three distinct phases. **Phase 1 (Dream It)** began in September 2023 and included community engagement activities to envision the future of the Petaluma River Park, assessment of site conditions to identify opportunities and constraints, development of a draft planning concept, and concluded in December 2024 with identification of a preferred concept.

The Project is currently in the beginning stages of **Phase 2 (Build It)**, which is anticipated to occur between January 2025 and December 2027. The first part of this Phase includes formal design, which requires review and approval by the City of Petaluma. Once approved, the Foundation will estimate project construction costs, select a general contractor, apply for and obtain City approval of any necessary building, grading, or similar construction permits, and commence construction.

Phase 3 (Love It) is anticipated between January and June 2028. It is anticipated to mark the completion of Project construction and will include special events, a ribbon cutting, programs, volunteer opportunities, and the ongoing operation of the Park in the future.

DISCUSSION

As previously discussed, the Petaluma River Park's conceptual design envisions an inclusive, nature-forward, and culturally rich public space. It describes the general characteristics of future development, including playgrounds, picnic areas, sports courts, a beach, and landscape installations consisting of trees and other native, climate-resilient species. The design also explores how the park will benefit the community through site design and community programming.

The Tree Advisory Committee is charged with duties designated and delegated by the City Council on matters pertaining to the management of tree resources within the city. The Committee also serves as a forum for the coordination of tree-related policies and advises the City on matters referred by City departments, and other Council-appointed hearing bodies. In this role, the Committee is uniquely positioned to consider this project's conceptual tree planting and management plan based on its own merits and in relation to Citywide tree canopy maintenance and expansion objectives. Commissioners are asked to consider these questions, which are intended to facilitate discussion:

1. How would the project integrate with or enhance existing City efforts to enhance tree canopy protection and expansion through forthcoming policy considerations?
2. Is there a role for the project to serve as a tree planting mitigation area for future infill City development that may experience challenges in meeting a tree planting requirement? If yes, what are some considerations for such a mitigation area offering?
3. What other opportunities to enhance the City's tree canopy does the Commission recommend the project explore as it continues to evolve its conceptual design?

CASE STUDIES

No case studies are associated with this project staff report. The project's conceptual design is informed by parks nationwide that are similar in spirit and scope, including:

- [India Basin Waterfront Parks](#), San Francisco, CA
- [Brooklyn Bridge Park](#), New York, NY
- [Memphis River Parks](#), Memphis, TN
- [The Davis Center at the Harlem Meer](#), Central Park, New York, NY
- [Story Mill Park](#), Bozeman, MT
- [Pogo Park](#), Richmond, CA

ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

As discussed in the Review Process section of this Staff Report, the Petaluma River Park Project is subject to several discretionary government entitlements or permits and is therefore required to comply with the California Environmental Quality Act regulations. During Planning review of the project's formal Planning entitlement applications, environmental review will be conducted and a CEQA determination will be prepared. Coordination between City staff and the Petaluma River Park Foundation is ongoing and includes identifying and preparing technical studies and analyses to support the project's required environmental review.

CITYWIDE GOALS & PRIORITIES

The Petaluma River Park project advances key Citywide goals and priorities, including:

- **Our Environmental Legacy:** Preserve and protect Petaluma's environment for future generations and become a municipal leader in sustainability by protecting our river and open space; reducing and drawing down greenhouse gas emissions; and encouraging sustainable development.
- **Spaces & Places That Inspire:** Create inviting natural and built places and spaces for contemplation, play, arts, and connection while celebrating our history and encouraging community pride.
- **An Economy That Prospers:** Encourage a thriving business environment that results in a strong, diverse, resilient economy and supports community prosperity.

ATTACHMENTS

Attachment 1: Conceptual Project Description, prepared by the Petaluma River Park Foundation, dated January 16, 2025

Attachment 2: Project Site Map and Conceptual Site Plan, prepared by the Petaluma River Park Foundation, dated January 16, 2025