INFORMATIONAL ITEM: Update on the Priority Conservation Area Program and a Potential Application Partnering with the City of East Palo Alto, City of Palo Alto and Midpeninsula Open Space District for the Baylands

RECOMMENDATION

This is an informational item and no action is required.

POLICY ISSUES

The Priority Conservation Area (PCA) designations are designed to position areas for access to funding sources for enhancements to open space areas. A PCA does not carry regulatory requirements, nor does it impact a local jurisdiction’s land use control.

BACKGROUND

Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) approved Plan Bay Area, a long-range, integrated transportation and land-use/housing strategy through 2040 for the San Francisco Bay Area. Plan Bay Area includes the designation of PCAs to balance housing and transportation demands with the need to preserve the region’s diverse farming, recreational, and resource lands for future generations. The Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) administers the program and plays a leadership role by providing guidance and support to local leaders as they submit PCA applications.

Priority Conservation Area Program

The PCA program was initiated in 2007 to identify Bay Area open spaces that (1) provide regionally significant agricultural, natural resource, scenic, recreational, and/or ecological values and ecosystem functions; (2) are in urgent need of protection due to pressure from urban development or other factors; and (3) have broad local support. As a result of the 2007 PCA process, there are currently 101 existing PCAs throughout the nine-county Bay Area. The City of Menlo Park submitted an unsuccessful PCA application in 2007 primarily because most of the land area in question was already in public ownership.

Subsequently ABAG updated the PCA program in July, 2014 in order to provide clearer specificity about the types, characteristics, and functions of PCAs, and also provide a
process to confirm existing PCAs and to create new ones with greater public notification. The program now limits nominating entities to city and county jurisdictions, and park and open space special districts. Thus, non-governmental entities are no longer able to sponsor a PCA, but can still partner with a jurisdiction or open space and park district. Another change to the programs allows existing protected lands to be included, which greatly increases Menlo Park’s chances for a successful application compared to 2007.

The program identifies four categories of PCAs that recognize the role of different kinds of PCAs in supporting the vitality of the region’s natural systems, rural economy, and human health.

1. **Natural Landscapes** – Areas critical to the functioning of wildlife and plant habitats, aquatic ecosystems and the region’s water supply and quality.
2. **Agricultural Lands** – Farmland, grazing land and timberland that support the region’s agricultural economy and provide additional benefits such as habitat protection and carbon sequestration.
3. **Urban Greening** – Existing and potential green spaces in cities that increase habitat connectivity, improve community health, capture carbon emissions, and address stormwater.
4. **Regional Recreation** – Existing and potential regional parks, trails, and other publicly accessible recreation facilities.

Of these four categories, staff believes that any of them except Agricultural Lands would be applicable to the potential PCA. Having more than one designation may increase eligibility for a broader array of future grant opportunities.

**ANALYSIS**

PCA designations serve to identify regionally significant open spaces and to position agencies to attract potential grant funding (Attachment A). In addition, the four categories give the PCAs flexibility and eligibility for a variety of funding sources that may either be targeted or broad in their scope. In 2014, the pilot PCA Grant program distributed $12.5 million in grant monies to a variety of projects throughout the Bay Area.

The current PCA process requires that nominating agencies send notifications to all of the jurisdictions in which the PCA is located. If a jurisdiction opposes the PCA, it will have 90 days from receipt of the notification to adopt a resolution of opposition. A resolution of opposition would invalidate the nomination. Applications are due to ABAG on May 30, 2015 and require the following items be included.

1. An adopted resolution by City/Town Council, Board of Supervisors, or Open Space or Park District Board, from the lead nominating jurisdiction in which the PCA is located.
2. A map and text describing the general area and boundaries of the PCA.
3. Selection of one or more of the PCA designations described below with supporting text and data.
4. Discussion of the regional and local importance of the PCA.

Staff has coordinated with staff from the City of East Palo Alto, City of Palo Alto and the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District to explore a potential application. Menlo Park has offered to serve as the lead agency for the application since the greatest area of the PCA is within Menlo Park’s jurisdiction. The working draft of the Potential PCA Boundary is included as Attachment B. The area covers Bedwell Bayfront Park, the Ravenswood Salt Pond Restoration Area, the Don Edwards San Francisco Bay National Wildlife Refuge, the Ravenswood Open Space Preserve, Cooley Landing, and the Baylands Nature Preserve. A common connector of many of these features is the existing/proposed Bay Trail. Menlo Park is already collaborating with the City of East Palo Alto and the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District on closing a gap in the Bay Trail by connecting University Avenue to the Ravenswood Preserve. Specific to Menlo Park, the PCA designation would expand funding opportunities for enhancing the current Bay Trail around Bedwell Bayfront Park and connections from the Belle Haven neighborhood to the Park, topics which have come up during the ConnectMenlo process.

The geographic area covered by the potential PCA includes a number of critical transportation (e.g., Dumbarton Bridge and Dumbarton Rail, utility (e.g., water, sewer, and electric facilities) and infrastructure issues (e.g., levees). It is staff’s understanding that a PCA designation would not impede any efforts to maintain or enhance these facilities and will confirm so prior to submitting an application. Staff is also in the process of reaching out to the San Francisciquito Creek Joint Powers Authority, especially related to the SAFERBay project, which looks to install levees in this area to address tidal flooding and sea level rise while restoring habitat and enhancing recreational opportunities. In the coming weeks, staff will also reach out to other property owners/service providers in the area. The exact boundary of the PCA will be refined over the coming weeks based on these consultations.

The PCA will require a resolution from the City Council. In addition, staff will need to notify affected jurisdictions and provide 90 days for their elected bodies to consider the nominations. These notification letters will be sent to respective City/General Managers. A resolution of opposition will invalidate the nomination and impede the City’s ability to submit an application for that PCA. It is staff’s hope that early coordination and collaboration with jurisdictions will result in broad support for the nominations to ensure a successful PCA application is submitted by the application deadline.

Staff will continue coordination with partners and jurisdictions, and anticipates bringing this item to the City Council for the adoption of resolutions in April 2015. With the Council’s adopted resolution, staff would be able to submit application for the nominated PCA to ABAG.

**IMPACT ON CITY RESOURCES**

There is no fiscal impact related to providing an informational report on the Priority Conservation Area program and application process.
ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW

This action is not a project under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), and no CEQA analysis is therefore required.

PUBLIC NOTICE

Public Notification was achieved by posting the agenda, with this agenda item being listed, at least 72 hours prior to the meeting.

ATTACHMENTS

A. Priority Conservation Area Concept Paper
B. Potential Priority Conservation Area Map

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Assistant Community Development Director
THE SAN FRANCISCO BAY AREA IS UNIQUE AMONG AMERICAN METROPOLISES. Parks and trails support our health and quality of life. Watersheds and other natural areas contribute to our clean water and air and help to protect us from disasters. The region’s farms and ranches give us fresh, healthy local food. Together our open spaces define the identity of the Bay Area and are a magnet for the innovators that drive its $535 billion economy.

SAFEGUARDING THE BAY AREA’S ONE-OF-A-KIND LANDSCAPE WILL REQUIRE A REGIONAL CONSERVATION STRATEGY BASED IN CONSERVATION SCIENCE AND RIGOROUS DATA.

PRIORITY CONSERVATION AREAS ARE A CORNERSTONE OF THAT STRATEGY.

- PRIORITY CONSERVATION AREAS
- BAY AREA GREENBELT
OUR CHERISHED LANDSCAPE

We are lucky to live somewhere so special. The San Francisco Bay Area is unique among American metropolises in the stunning beauty of its landscape. Parks and trails support our health and quality of life by giving us the opportunity to get outside. Watersheds and other natural areas contribute to our resilience by providing us with clean water and air and help to protect us from disasters like flooding and landslides—threats that will only grow with climate change. The region’s farms and ranches give us fresh, healthy local food. Together our open spaces define the identity of the Bay Area and are a magnet for the innovators that drive its $535 billion economy.

The people of the Bay Area clearly cherish our special landscape. Through 24 bond measures and tax increases since 1988, voters across the region have approved close to $1.6 billion to preserve critical habitat, protect farmland, improve water quality, and create new parks. Of the region’s 3.6 million acres of open space—our greenbelt—1.3 million acres have been preserved through land purchases and easements. An additional 2 million acres are protected through a range of growth management policies that have been put in place by voters and elected leaders.

Despite our region’s success in protecting open space, the risks to our greenbelt are profound. Over 322,000 acres are at risk of development in the next 30 years. The Bay Area will add 2 million new residents by 2040 and this growth could create pressure to weaken the growth management policies that protect 60 percent of the greenbelt. Effectively safeguarding the Bay Area’s one-of-a-kind landscape will require a regional conservation strategy based in the latest conservation science and rigorous data. Priority Conservation Areas (PCAs) have the potential to be a cornerstone of such a strategy.

VOTER & ELECTED LEADER SUPPORT FOR LANDSCAPES

24 BOND MEASURES & TAX INCREASES

$1.6 BILLION IN PRESERVATION, WATER QUALITY & PARKS

2 MILLION ACRES PROTECTED BY POLICY
CONSERVING THE LANDSCAPE: KEY TO PLAN BAY AREA

The preservation and stewardship of the Bay Area’s greenbelt is key to implementing Plan Bay Area. Under Plan Bay Area, the region’s next generation of growth is to be focused in Priority Development Areas (PDAs) within our cities and towns; no development is envisioned beyond existing urban boundaries. Because this focused growth will require Bay Area residents and workers to drive less, greenhouse gas emissions from personal vehicles are expected to drop 16% per capita by 2035.

Development in the greenbelt that is isolated from public transit and other services and amenities requires more driving and could cause the region to fall short of Plan Bay Area’s greenhouse gas pollution reduction expectation. Farms, ranches, and natural areas also function as carbon sinks. Trees, plants and crops growing on the landscape remove greenhouse gases from the atmosphere and store them away. Allowing development that paves over the Bay Area’s greenbelt degrades this carbon storage function.

Additionally, if development does occur beyond existing urban boundaries it will require significant expenditures to build new roads, sewer lines, and other infrastructure. Such infrastructure costs would be in addition to the substantial infrastructure investment needs within the region’s PDAs. Development in the greenbelt would result in the region’s infrastructure funds being spread too thin.

A robust regional conservation strategy for the Bay Area is a win-win approach. It will guide the protection of the unique open spaces that make the Bay Area so special—our parks and trails, farms and ranches, watersheds and other components of the greenbelt. Such a strategy will also serve as a driver of focused growth, ensuring that urban infrastructure dollars are spent wisely and that we achieve the ambitious greenhouse gas pollution reduction goals envisioned in Plan Bay Area.

Priority Conservation Areas and Priority Development Areas complement each other in many ways. For example, each contribute to the above goals.
THE PRESERVATION AND STEWARDSHIP OF THE BAY AREA’S GREENBELT IS KEY TO IMPLEMENTING PLAN BAY AREA.

PRIORITY CONSERVATION AREAS: WHAT ARE THEY?
In 2008, local governments, special districts and conservation organizations worked together to establish the Bay Area’s original Priority Conservation Areas. These PCAs consist of regionally significant open spaces about which there is broad consensus for long-term protection. The PCAs are diverse and include everything from recreation areas that help Bay Area residents live healthy active lifestyles, to watersheds that provide the region with high-quality drinking water, to farmland from which we get fresh, local food. The PCAs serve to attract funds to support the long-term protection of these areas. Through the Plan Bay Area process, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission (MTC) established a $10 million pilot grant program to help fund the protection of the PCAs.

Community leaders embraced the PCA concept; currently there are nearly 100 PCAs spread across the nine Bay Area counties. The PCAs not only serve to indicate what land should be protected, they also help to articulate where urbanized development is most appropriate and where it is not. In doing so, the PCAs help to define the holistic vision of Plan Bay Area. They serve as the underpinnings of a “greenprint” to complement the region’s blueprint for how our cities and towns should grow.

Since 2008, our understanding of the Bay Area’s one-of-a-kind landscape has improved. Research and analysis now gives us a much better sense of how our farms, ranches, and working lands benefit our health and quality of life. This research and analysis also helps us understand how conservation of the landscape can contribute to our economy as well as the resilience of natural systems that do everything from protect us from floods, to ensure the long-term viability of plants and animals that also call the Bay Area home. Using this information to update the PCA program will improve the program’s ability to serve as a cornerstone of the region’s conservation strategy.

THE PCA PROGRAM UPDATE
The Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) is now in the process of revising the PCA program. This update will result in greater specificity about the qualities and functions of different types of PCAs. To achieve this specificity, ABAG has developed a new set of designations for different PCA types (similar to the “place types” developed for PDAs during the Plan Bay Area process). Additionally, a science-based method has been developed for evaluating nominated PCAs. The revised PCA program also seeks to address the need for urban parkland and providing green space in growing PDAs.

These modifications will greatly enhance the ability of PCAs to contribute effectively to a regional conservation strategy.

By June 2014, ABAG will have adopted modifications to the PCA Program and opened an application window that will last through May 2015. As currently recommended, nominations will be accepted to transition existing PCAs into the revised program as well as for new PCAs. PCA applications will be accepted on a rolling basis with two adoption points over the course of the year.
ANALYZING THE UPDATE: REASONS TO BE EXCITED

ABAG’s proposed revision to the PCA program is a significant positive step toward ensuring the program realizes its potential to serve as an effective guide for a regional land conservation strategy. The four “designations” (again, similar to the “place types” for PDAs)—Natural Landscapes, Agricultural Lands, Regional Recreation and Urban Greening—provide a simple typology that helps to communicate how the Bay Area’s open spaces provide benefits to the quality of life, economy, and resilience of the region. The new application process explicitly requires applicants to use data from a rich set of information sources to articulate the benefits of proposed PCAs. This commitment to an evidence-based approach will help to enshrine conservation-science and an understanding of conservation priorities into land-use planning across the Bay Area.

The addition of the Urban Greening designation is an exciting recognition that nature in urban areas matters. To most effectively contribute to the region’s conservation strategy, Urban Greening PCAs should contribute to regionally significant functions; functions such as contributions to regional agricultural, natural resource conservation, ecosystem protection, or the enhancement of scenic or recreational values.

Transitioning the existing PCAs into the new program is critical. These areas are a solid foundation upon which an even better program will be built. The original PCAs demonstrate the shared values regarding our landscape that exist across the Bay Area and a broad recognition of the many benefits our natural and working lands provide (maps at the end of the document demonstrate how current PCAs overlap with open space benefits). The original PCAs were adopted without requiring resolutions from city councils or boards of supervisors when they were initially approved, such resolutions should not be necessary to transition existing PCAs into the revised program.

MAKING IT HAPPEN

The Priority Development Areas and the Priority Conservation Areas are two essential pillars in the effort to make the Bay Area a sustainable, thriving region in the decades ahead. These two programs knit together the region’s land use and transportation priorities and provide clear guidance on how to best focus limited intellectual and financial resources. Both programs help local leaders ensure that our cities and towns are healthy and thriving and are supported by the amazing assets nature provides. Effective implementation of the Priority Conservation Area program must be prioritized in order to fully achieve the vision of a sustainable and thriving region articulated in Plan Bay Area. The conservation community, from land trusts to special districts to local and regional non-profits, is ready to work with local leaders to effectively implement the PCA program, as well as use the plethora of data and analysis that now exists regarding the Bay Area’s landscape to help make land-use decisions with conservation in mind.
The following are recommendations for how both local leaders and the Association of Bay Area Governments can ensure the implementation of the PCA program is successful—not only in the near-term as the program is updated and new PCAs are nominated and reviewed, but over the long-term as the PCAs anchor the region’s conservation strategy.

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR LOCAL LEADERS**

The first thing local leaders can do to maximize the success of the PCA program is to support the immediate inclusion of existing PCAs into the new framework.

Additionally, local leaders should work with land management agencies and public health groups to identify new PCAs and make sure they are adopted.

Also, local leaders should feel empowered to take the conservation science that will be used to modify and create PCAs and use those tools broadly in land-use decision making. Steps can be taken such as:

- Factor in the impacts/benefits of natural resources, working lands, and parks as a baseline for infrastructure plans, programs, and project decisions.
- Consider “green infrastructure” as a viable solution to infrastructure challenges, such as water quality control and sea-level rise adaptation.
- Establish agricultural land preservation strategies that ensure a critical mass of land for the production, processing, and distribution of local food.
- Ensure conservation best practices are integrated into the implementation of development and infrastructure projects.

**RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ABAG**

ABAG should continue to play a leadership role by providing support and guidance to local leaders as they submit PCA applications. As the PCA program is implemented ABAG can take the specific following actions to help ensure that conservation strategies are effectively implemented throughout the region.

- Facilitate access to online data that will allow users to identify the specific benefits a particular geographic area contains.
- Develop a system to track how well communities across the region are achieving conservation goals.
- Provide technical assistance to facilitate connection of conservation funds with appropriate projects.
- Support policy innovation as a strategy to protect PCAs and implement regional conservation strategies.
- Continue to support the State Coastal Conservancy’s management of the region-wide OBAG conservation grant program.
- Scale local efforts to map urban greening benefits to produce a regional strategy.
NATURAL LANDSCAPES

Values:
Land and Water Habitat, Recreation and Tourism

Strategy:
Safeguarding and restoring natural ecosystems.

Conservation Lands Network

Wildlife Habitat that is Essential, Important, Fragmented and For Further Consideration; Critical Linkages
Priority Conservation Areas

Sources: Bay Area Open Space Council, SC Wildlands
**Agricultural Lands**

Values:
- Food Production, Jobs,
- Rural Character

Strategy:
- Ensure agricultural lands remain in production.

Farmland Mapping and Monitoring Program

- Farmland and Grazing Land
- Priority Conservation Areas

Source: CA Department of Conservation

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Regional Recreation

Values:
Health, Recreation, Tourism, Land Value

Strategy:
Provide residents with access to parks and recreational open space.

Regional Trails and Parks
- Proposed Regional Trail Inside PCA
- Proposed Regional Trail Outside PCA
- Existing SF Bay Trail and SF Ridge Trail
- Publicly Accessible Protected Lands
- Priority Conservation Areas

Sources: SF Bay Trail, SF Ridge Trail, PCA Trails, Protected Areas Database, National Conservation Easement Database
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TOGETHER OUR OPEN SPACES DEFINE THE IDENTITY OF THE BAY AREA AND ARE A MAGNET FOR THE INNOVATORS THAT DRIVE ITS $535 BILLION ECONOMY.