

Recommendations from the Natural Resource Management Plan Discussion Group to the Bidwell Park Master Management Plan Update process

Our discussion group has sincere concerns about the future of ecosystem and cultural resource health in Bidwell Park. The following recommendations are the result of a group effort. They address management modeling that might more appropriately be applied to the language of the Bidwell Park Master Management Plan (MMP) in the main text, rather than in the Natural Resources Management Plan (NRMP) itself.

One of our top concerns is not the availability of good natural resource management information and models, but rather the implementation of both the NRMP and the MMP itself. Achieving this implementation has been a challenge in the past for staff and Commission. Unmanaged park use and under-assessed natural resources, along with a willingness to proceed with recreational uses for the sake of recreational uses under short-term public pressure has resulted in a decline of natural and cultural features.

We sincerely believe that Bidwell Park is a natural wonder of the highest order and deserves the best natural and cultural management available. In many ways, Bidwell Park has much in common with National Parks. Therefore we make the following recommendations to help facilitate the implementation of the park-wide goals and objectives and other management goals:

1. The Bidwell Park and Playground Commission and the Park Director must follow the Goals, Objectives and Recommendations of the MMP. To be effective, this may need to be codified.

While funding, staffing and other constraints will always limit *how much* of the plan can be implemented, the MMP represents the type of “project” (as a whole, in the CEQA sense) that *should* be implemented.

The updated MMP needs to clarify the importance of this (pending Council approval) by defining the roles of the Bidwell Park and Playground Commission (BPPC) and the Park Director as subject to the MMP. The MMP should be their first reference and their bottom line. Analogous to the City’s General Plan, staff should refer to the MMP for guidance and requirements. This needs to be made very clear. This is the only way long-term management can succeed at long-term goals. Short-term pressures should not be allowed to lead to more degradation of the Park.

The MMP is scheduled for update on a relatively frequent basis and thus this important request should not be perceived as any threat to flexibility in the adaptive management sense. Timely updates will result in ample opportunities for new proposals. Focusing on the implementation of the MMP’s recommendations between updates will allow the necessary means to realize the long-term goals associated with resource protection and sharing of the Bidwell Park experience with future generations.

(Please note that the City Council can change the City’s General Plan, but in limited ways.)

2. Natural resource protection should be a top priority in Bidwell Park.

There will always be much debate over how much and what kind of recreational opportunity should be allowed in Bidwell Park. Regardless of the inevitability, the desirability, and the preexisting nature of human activity upon the land, the number one priority of the City and our community with regards to Bidwell Park should be the health of the native ecosystem, with few exceptions, such as safety.

This model is clearly the intent of the 1990 plan which carefully worded its Goals, Objectives and Recommendations to acknowledge the need to evaluate all Park activities in their relationship to the native ecosystem, noting that “uses which cause substantial environmental deterioration, individually or cumulatively...” should be restricted, and “ facilities known to contribute substantially to the decline of natural features or conditions ... should be redesigned, relocated or discontinued”, etc.

However, this principal has not received the attention it deserves. Several examples come to mind; here are just a few: vernal pools at the disc golf site never protected, now severely damaged; Butte County Checkerbloom left to fend for itself at the same project site; the current trails plan assumption that suggested corridors for new alignments and existing bootleg trails can be entertained as possibly desirable *before natural and cultural resources have been assessed*.

This principle should also be applied to temporary or seasonal closures of some recreational areas in the manner of closing wet trails to mountain biking, via signage. If evidence exists that sensitive resources are being impacted and if such resources could be protected by closures, park management should act proactively. For instance, Tribal community members currently feel that there should be seasonal signage in certain riparian areas to educate people about the presence of spawning salmon, and implore them to use other swimming areas.

Natural and Cultural resource issues addressed in the MMP should not be marginalized to the benefit of recreational development, even though recreation, as well as access and circulation issues are important.

(Note that there is zero intent for these recommendations “to keep people out of the Park”; only that in order to have a functioning park ecosystem, the interface of natural resources and people needs to be managed.)

3. A standard City CEQA assessment of Natural and Cultural Resources should be completed before any development of new facilities is allowed to occur.

Bidwell Park’s natural and cultural resources are far too valuable to be allowed to succumb to fast-tracked planning resulting from urban generated public pressure. Our community is immeasurably blessed to have in its stewardship a park that compares favorably to other magnificent natural parks of the American West.

Most of our trail system - both designated and bootleg – is the result of *no planning and therefore, no assessment*. This pattern must stop before the quality of our Park is irreparably lost – why not now?

As we actively manage the resources of Bidwell Park, let’s do it right.

4. The City needs a qualified Natural Resource Scientist /Manager, who understands scientific concerns, cultural concerns, and CEQA processes, on staff.

The concerned natural science community and the tribal community are currently having significant problems carrying on meaningful dialogue with the City over issues of concern – both legal and descriptive.

The Park Dept. is only one logical choice for this position, providing Bidwell Park and creekside greenways with the most direct benefit. Planning issues citywide would benefit as well from such a position; therefore the Planning Dept. would also be a reasonable choice. The creation of a new ‘stand alone’ City position might also be considered.

With regards to the management of an ecosystem in general, and especially with streams and erosion, it is often less expensive to avoid “fighting nature”, thus this position may ultimately save more money than it costs.

5. In order to protect the environmental assets and functions of the Park, actively preserve and restore natural functions in all areas.

This suggested goal(s) should appear under the appropriate heading(s). The Big Chico Creek Ecological Reserve has some good language in its plan for this.

An example of current policy that actively takes both natural functions into account and prioritizes them is the ‘large woody debris policy’ currently used by the Park Dept. in which large woody debris are allowed to remain in the creek unless a ‘clear and present danger to facilities or the public’ deems it necessary to remove or modify the debris.

6. Mandate a yearly assessment of funding gaps and staffing needs with regards to the implementation of the MMP.

Providing this assessment provides the means to know what has and has not been accomplished, and gives the City and the public a clear view of the level of support a park of this type requires. Too often management recommendations amount to a non sequitur with regards to available means.

For example, there was a lot of public pressure to discontinue the use of most herbicides in the Park, which the Park Dept. did. However the promised volunteer labor to replace the herbicide use did not appear. The same situation occurred with the Deer Pen. Staff organizations and volunteers were left without adequate means of achieving their work goals.

Thank you for considering these recommendations. We look forward to future discussions regarding these matters.

Sincerely,

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