



**DATE:** December 1, 2015

**CATEGORY:** Public Hearing

**DEPT.:** Community Development

**TITLE:** **Charleston Retention Basin Project**

## **RECOMMENDATION**

1. Approve a Mitigated Negative Declaration for the Charleston Retention Basin Improvement Project (Attachment 1 to the Council report).
2. Adopt a Resolution for a Planned Community Permit for a Habitat Expansion and Restoration Project and a Heritage Tree Removal Permit to Allow the Removal of 119 Heritage Trees at the Charleston Retention Basin, to be read in title only, further reading waived (Attachment 2 to the Council report).

## **BACKGROUND**

The Charleston Retention Basin is a stormwater basin and public open space owned and maintained by the City of Mountain View and was originally constructed in 1980. The primary function of the retention basin is to capture large peak stormwater flows from a 360-acre commercial zone in the North Bayshore Area and utilize smaller pumps to discharge the flows into Stevens Creek. The basin supports riparian and freshwater marsh habitat and includes an existing decomposed granite pedestrian trail around the perimeter that provides recreational opportunities.

### **Project Site Location**

The project site is located in the North Bayshore Area, east of North Shoreline Boulevard between Charleston Road and Stierlin Court. The project site includes the Charleston Retention Basin and portions of the adjacent parcels owned by Google Inc. (Google) and HCP Life Science REIT, Inc. (HCP).



Location Map

Surrounding land uses include office and commercial uses to the north and south, Stevens Creek and NASA Ames Research Center to the east, and the vacant “Charleston East” site to the west across North Shoreline Boulevard. Shoreline Amphitheatre and other multi-use recreational activities associated with Shoreline at Mountain View are located northwest of the project site.

## **Previous Meetings**

### *Environmental Organizations*

Representatives from Google and H.T. Harvey & Associates Ecological Consultants met with the Committee for Green Foothills, Citizens Committee to Complete the Refuge, Sierra Club, Santa Clara Valley Audubon Society, and California Native Plant Society on several occasions early in the project design process to obtain information on the nature and value of biological resources in and adjacent to the project site as well as gather feedback on the project scope and design. The feedback and recommendations from these meetings resulted in many changes to the plans which benefit the habitat enhancement goals of the overall project. A joint environmental organization letter was received from the above-mentioned organizations expressing their support for the project as currently designed (see Attachment 4 – Support Letter).

### *Administrative Zoning Hearing*

On October 28, 2015, an Administrative Zoning public hearing was held for the project. Four members from the public spoke regarding the project. Two speakers expressed support for the project and two speakers questioned the ecological impact of the proposed tree removal and other improvements on the existing natural environment and wildlife. The Zoning Administrator recommended conditional approval of the project to the City Council.

### *City Staff Review*

The proposed project would occur primarily on City property and requires review and coordination by multiple City departments, including the Community Development, Public Works, and Community Services Departments. Google, H.T. Harvey & Associates, and staff representatives from all three departments have been involved in the review and modification of the project scope and layout which has resulted in the current proposal.

## ANALYSIS

### **Project Overview**

The project proposes to improve the existing natural habitat, improve pedestrian and bicycle circulation, and improve recreation opportunities around the Charleston Retention Basin. The project consists of the removal of 134 existing parking spaces located adjacent to the retention basin in order to allow for habitat expansion; grading in select areas of the existing basin slopes to allow for habitat appropriate plantings; the removal of non-native and declining plants and trees, including the removal of 119 Heritage trees; and the comprehensive replanting of the upland basin areas with native and wildlife-supportive plants and trees. The project also includes bicycle and pedestrian circulation improvements, including the realignment and improvement of the existing pedestrian path around the basin; a new, separate bicycle path in the southwestern quadrant which would connect to a larger bicycle path network in the area; and two new pedestrian bridges across the basin (see Attachment 3—Project Plans). The existing trees and plantings within the center of the basin are not part of the project and would remain untouched.



Site Plan

### **North Bayshore Precise Plan Habitat Overlay Zones**

The North Bayshore Area includes sensitive habitat areas, special-status species, and other native species. The North Bayshore Precise Plan outlines a series of standards, guidelines, and improvement projects to protect and enhance habitat and biological resources, including the establishment of three Habitat Overlay Zones (HOZ): Burrowing Owl; Egret Rookery; and Open Water, Creeks, and Storm Drain Facilities.

Each HOZ provides standards for site development, which apply to new construction and site modifications within each zone with the intent to protect sensitive habitat by guiding building placement adjacent to high-value habitat locations, limiting new impervious surface, minimizing light pollution, and guiding landscape design.

The project site is located within the Open Water, Creeks, and Storm Drain Facilities HOZ and conforms to the Precise Plan standards for changes within an HOZ. Implementation of the project is intended to directly benefit habitat at the basin and the wildlife species by increasing the net area and quality of native riparian habitat and reducing nearby parking surfaces and areas vegetated with non-native plants. The new habitat planting areas would also serve to buffer existing wetland and riparian habitat from disturbance, thereby increasing their value to wildlife.

### **Habitat Restoration and Expansion**

The proposed native habitat expansion and planting would result in a net benefit to wildlife, especially with respect to birds and native insects. Native riparian willow and cottonwood forests, which provide high-value wildlife habitat, would be extensively planted around the basin. The proposed planting plan targets the provision of high-foliage height diversity or layering of vegetation. When more layers of vegetation are present in a given area, more bird species are typically supported. As a result, the planting plan for the Charleston Retention Basin includes ground cover, under-story species, and tree canopy species capable of growing tall to maximize the number of niches that can be supported in the planting area, thereby increasing the number of bird species that can be accommodated.

### **Bridges**

The project proposes to install two pedestrian-only bridges over the Charleston Retention Basin to improve the north-south pedestrian circulation and connectivity needs in the area. The two pedestrian bridges would be located on the western portion of the retention basin and would be aligned to minimize the removal of existing native trees and span the narrowest parts of the basin.

The bridges would be approximately 10' wide. The bridges would be prefabricated clear-span structures with specific features, including a low-profile and high-visibility structure (e.g., no glass, high walls, or fine netting) in order to limit disturbance to wildlife in the basin. Bridges would be placed on concrete bridge abutments that would be placed at each end of the bridge outside of the marsh habitat.

## **Pedestrian Pathway**

The Charleston Retention Basin includes an existing decomposed granite pathway that circles the entire basin and provides pedestrian connections to existing sidewalks, internal streets, adjacent office and commercial uses, and the Stevens Creek Trail. The proposed path realignment would include removal of the existing decomposed granite pathway and the installation of a new realigned decomposed granite pedestrian pathway that would vary between 6' and 8' in width. The new realigned path would be approximately in the same location or farther away from the edge of the basin, allowing for the expansion of native habitat in some areas. The western portions of the new pathway would be constructed approximately 30' farther away from the retention basin than the existing pathway.

## **Bicycle Pathway**

The project would also include construction of a new designated bicycle path in the southwestern quadrant of the Charleston Retention Basin. The new 12' wide concrete bicycle path would be a standalone bicycle path that would run parallel to the realigned decomposed granite pedestrian path along only the southwestern quadrant. The bicycle path would be constructed on the paved and developed portions of the adjacent parcels and would be achieved by removing existing parking spaces.

## **Tree Removal**

There are a total of 362 trees currently within the project boundaries, 228 of which are considered Heritage trees. Tree removal for the project was considered on an individual tree basis, in coordination with H.T. Harvey & Associates. The trees that were chosen for removal include non-native species that have low habitat-contributing attributes and trees that are nearing the end of their life cycle and/or dead and would result in the removal of 119 Heritage trees.

Approximately 1,873 native trees (including 119 24" box oak replacement trees) would be planted as part of the proposed project which would increase the number of trees within the project boundaries by more than five times, thereby increasing the native habitat to support the wildlife in the area and the overall tree canopy coverage.

## **Project Phasing and Timing**

Construction of the proposed project would occur in two phases. Implementing the project in phases is proposed to lessen and temporally distribute the effects of short-term vegetation loss and wildlife disruption while new habitat establishes.

Construction also needs to occur outside of the bird nesting season which runs from February 1 to August 31. Construction during Phase 1 would focus on the south side and the northwest quadrant of the basin, including the two bridge connections. Phase 2 includes the remainder of the improvements along the north and east sides of the basin, approximately one year after the completion of Phase 1. Phase I of the project is anticipated to start in September 2016 with total project completion in early 2019.

### **ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW**

An Initial Study and Draft Mitigated Negative Declaration were prepared for the proposed project in conformance with the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) guidelines. The environmental analysis determined that with implementation of the proposed mitigation measures, all impacts of the proposed project would be mitigated to a less than significant level (see Attachment 1—Initial Study, Draft Mitigated Negative Declaration, and Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program). The public review period for the Initial Study and Draft Mitigated Negative Declaration was from September 25, 2015 to October 26, 2015, during which no public comments were received.

Permits from other governmental agencies for the proposed improvements that are part of the project will be coordinated as necessary with the appropriate agency (i.e., U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, Regional Water Quality Control Board).

### **FISCAL IMPACT**

Google proposes to fund all initial project improvements under oversight by the City and other necessary governmental agencies and maintain the plantings and irrigation system for five years. After this five-year period, the irrigation system would be abandoned and the area will be allowed to naturalize, which is appropriate for a wildlife habitat area.

The City currently maintains the pathway and general areas surrounding the basin. Anticipated future maintenance costs and responsibilities would be similar to existing maintenance responsibilities and existing staff resources are sufficient to serve the site. The new bridges would be maintained by Google under an approved maintenance agreement.

### **CONCLUSION**

The proposed habitat expansion and restoration project at the Charleston Retention Basin is intended to directly benefit habitat at the basin and the wildlife species using

them by increasing the net area and quality of native riparian habitat and reducing nearby parking surfaces and areas vegetated with non-native plants. The new habitat planting areas would also serve to buffer existing wetland and riparian habitat from disturbance, thereby increasing their value to wildlife. The proposed project would result in a net benefit to wildlife which supports the North Bayshore Precise Plan goals to protect and enhance habitat and biological resources in the North Bayshore Area. Additionally, approval of the project would not result in significant environmental impacts with implementation of the proposed mitigation measures and will not have a significant effect on the environment.

### **ALTERNATIVES**

1. Refer the project back to the Zoning Administrator for further review or project modifications.
2. Deny the Planned Community Permit and Heritage Tree Removal Permit applications, finding that the proposed project scope and improvements are not appropriate for the site.
3. Provide other direction.

**PUBLIC NOTICING**

The agenda was posted, a notice was placed in the local newspaper, and all property owners within a 300' radius and other interested stakeholders were notified of this hearing.

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- Attachments:
1. Initial Study, Mitigated Negative Declaration, and Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program
  2. Resolution for a Planned Community Permit and Heritage Tree Removal Permit
  3. Project Plans
  4. Support Letter