



COMPREHENSIVE PLAN UPDATE CITIZENS ADVISORY COMMITTEE SUBCOMMITTEE NATURAL ENVIRONMENT ELEMENT

November 1, 2016

Downtown Library – El Camino Real Room
270 Forest Avenue
Palo Alto, CA 94301
10:00 AM to 1:00 PM

TITLE: Natural Environment Element Subcommittee Discussion
FROM: Elena Lee, Interim Planning Manager,
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Background

This will be the third subcommittee meeting on the Natural Environment Element.

At this meeting, the subcommittee will identify issues for further discussion at the next meeting of the full CAC on the Natural Environment Element, to be held on November 15th, 2016. Following this meeting, City staff and the consultants will prepare a staff report for the November 15th CAC meeting that summarizes the subcommittee discussion and outlines the issues on which the CAC may choose to focus.

At this November 1st subcommittee meeting, the remaining (first four) goals will be discussed:

1. Open Space
2. Creeks and Riparian Areas
3. Urban Forest
4. Water Resources

As shown on the agenda, specific times for these topics are proposed in order to accommodate staff experts from Public Works, including the Urban Forest and Utilities departments.

Staff Reports for previous Natural Environment Subcommittee and CAC Meetings contain summaries of, and links to, numerous documents, studies and City effort related to Palo Alto's natural environment. Both the [August 30th Natural Environment Subcommittee Staff Report \(link\)](#) and [September 20th CAC Staff Report \(link\)](#) contain this information.

Policy Framework Changes and Issues

The attached Natural Environment policy framework reflects the input of the Natural Environment subcommittee at their August 30th meeting, input from the September 20th meeting of the CAC and City staff recommendations.

The major changes under each goal are listed below.

Goal 1: Open Space

- Goal N-1 was reworded for clarity at the recommendation of subcommittee members, neither its meaning nor intent has changed.
- Policies and programs have been reorganized and regrouped in a more logical way; policies addressing City actions on public open space are first and then are followed by policies and programs addressing private development and regional collaboration.
- Policies referring to “special status” or “sensitive” plants or animals were reworded to include all species, not just plant or animal. “Special-status species” are those that are protected by listing on various State or federal lists of rare, threatened or endangered species and whose habitats therefore require special management.
- Members of the subcommittee recommended limiting single family residential development in open space areas, for conservation and protection of habitat. City staff verified that Palo Alto’s Open Space zoning district has been updated since release of the current Comprehensive Plan, and now requires a 10-acre minimum lot size for single family homes and limits the amount of impervious surface allowed, which would limit square footages. These changes to the Zoning Code were the outcome of a 2-year effort including extensive stakeholder outreach. Therefore, residential development limitations have not been integrated in the Element.

Goal 2: Creeks and Riparian Areas

- Policies and programs were updated to reflect that a Stream Corridor Protection Ordinance has been prepared and adopted. Specific distances, such as the width of the setback, are included in the ordinance and are not included in the Comp Plan in order to allow flexibility to increase the setback when additional right-of-way is available, particularly in less channelized reaches of creeks.
- Policies and programs regarding low-impact development were grouped together and shifted to Goal N-4, Water Resources (see additional discussion below).
- Policies and programs regarding regional inter-agency coordination have been grouped together.
- A new PTC program related to expanded flood zones, was moved to the Flood section of the Safety Element.

Goal 3: Urban Forest and Understory

- The term “understory” was added to name of this section, as was Policy N3.4, which supports the protection of soil and understory vegetation.
- Policies and programs were regrouped and reorganized to eliminate redundancy and sharpen this section’s focus on protecting and enhancing the urban forest.

- Multiple policies and programs under this goal were revised to better align with the Urban Forest Master Plan. These include policies related to the urban canopy, tree planting programs, and protection of trees from development and construction activities.
- Policy N3.5 was revised to expand its influence from heritage trees to all regulated trees, on both public and private property.
- Program N3.3.4, calling for participation in carbon credit programs to take financial advantage of the City's urban forest, is being reviewed by City Urban Forestry staff and remains subject to revision. Note that this program, as currently formulated, is intended to position Palo Alto to offer its urban forest as a "receiving" project into which other agencies or organizations would pay to receive carbon credits.
- Policy N3.6 was revised to ensure that it does not promote the removal of mature non-native trees. Instead, the policy promotes reducing the planting of new non-natives.
- Members of the subcommittee expressed concern that basements and underground portions of existing Downtown buildings are allowed to extend beyond lot lines and encroach beneath City sidewalks, impacting the roots and overall health of Downtown street trees. City staff verified that this practice was permitted in the past, but is no longer allowed under current zoning and building regulations. However, Program N3.2.1 has been added to explore ways to prevent and ameliorate conflicts between trees and tree roots with above and below ground infrastructure.

Goal 4: Water Resources

- Multiple policies calling for low impact development (LID) and impervious surfaces were included in the Water Resources goals (as well as Open Space and Creeks and Riparian Areas). Public Works staff assisted in the consolidation of these policies into fewer simple, effective policies that account for existing regulation in the City's adopted stormwater management ordinance (Municipal Code Section 16.11.030 [\[link\]](#)), which includes detailed technical requirements for all development projects, significant redevelopment projects, and roadway projects, in compliance with State requirements. The ordinance requires on-site stormwater retention through a range of possible LID measures including preservation of natural areas and trees, rainwater cisterns, vegetated swales, pervious pavement, and green roofs.
- The City's Public Works Department is currently in the process of reviewing procedures for basement construction and other excavations and is preparing a report to take to Council, tentatively before the end of 2016, to seek Council direction. Because this effort is already underway, the policy frameworks for both Natural Environment and Safety include programs to continue to study this important issue and formulate specific policies and regulations, rather than establishing policies and regulations now in advance of the conclusion of the Public Works study and Council deliberations. The exception is Policy S2.9 in the Safety Element, "Do not allow habitable basements within the flood hazard zone." This is an existing City policy.
- A new PTC policy referencing the City's existing Integrated Pest Management policy, which would reduce pesticide applications and toxicity, was moved to the Hazardous Materials section

of the Safety Element, due to its importance to all aspects of health and safety, beyond water quality alone.

- Program N4.3.1 was revised to study the problem of parking controls and street sweeping.
- Numerous rainwater-, stormwater- and recycling-related policies from this goal were moved to the storm drainage and recycled water sections under the Infrastructure goal in the Safety Element.

Next Steps

The policy framework of Goals 1 through 4 of the natural Environment Element will be further revised in response to subcommittee comments and will be brought forward to the full CAC in the packet for the November 15th meeting. Comments from the CAC received during that meeting will be incorporated into the policy framework, and then combined with the policy framework of Goals 5 through 8. The fully revised Draft Natural Environment Element will then be developed for consideration in December.