KTU+A

Report for Mission Trails Regional Park

Master Plan Update

Visual Resources

June 20, 2016

Visual Effects and Neighborhood Character

The Mission Trails Regional Park (MTRP) Master Plan Update (MPU) incorporates recommendations of the Natural Resources Management Plan (NRMP) such as trail rerouting around sensitive habitat and species, and fencing and signage where appropriate. As such, the NRMP recommendations are considered evaluated here alongside the MPU recommendations.

Many of the recommendations within the MPU, implemented individually or en masse, generally would have little or no effect on the visual environment of Mission Trails Regional Park, the surrounding community plan areas, major roadways, residential areas, public viewing areas, visual landmarks, or scenic vistas. The majority of planning, management, and funding recommendations are conceptual recommendations that would have no noticeable visual effect if implemented, individually or cumulatively, beyond increasing the continuity of natural vegetation and habitat within the park.

Most of the Habitat/Species recommendations within the MUP would increase the quality and distribution of native vegetation within the park, which in turn would increase visual continuity of the park, and reduce the visual contrast between the existing broad, naturally surfaced trails with vegetation adjacent to them. The Habitat/Species recommendations that would have a noticeable visual effect may be trail re-routing, fencing, and signage.

Trail management recommendations within each planning area fall into several categories within the MPU, including Management, Habitat/Species, and (most often) Recreation Recommendations. Trail management includes realignment, revegetation along trail edges, re-grading, signage, and fences, and generally would not be highly noticeable. Most proposed and realigned trails would be narrower than existing trails, but similar in length. They would occur near existing trails, and have a similar alignment, with little visual effect. Abandoned or closed trail segments would be revegetated, and would eventually blend with the surrounding habitat and become visually unnoticeable, particularly from afar.

Included in the trail re-alignment recommendations are several trails and utility roads that are wider than necessary. These would be made narrower by planting native vegetation along the edges, which would increase the visual continuity of the park and lessen the visibility of the trails.

The MPU also proposes to construct many new trail segments throughout MTRP, while closing many other existing trail segments and utility roads. Closed trails and roads would be revegetated, and as the native vegetation matures, would become visually unnoticeable. Development of new trail segments would remove vegetation and introduce new linear features into the park's environment. The new trails would be visually similar to existing trails and utility roads, but generally would be narrower, and thus less prominent. New trails developed in low-lying areas would not be highly visible from other areas of the park or from surrounding neighborhoods and roadways. On the other hand, proposed new trail segments along high-elevation hillsides would potentially be visible from many points, including open space areas within the park, major roadways near the park, and neighboring residential areas. The new trails would be narrow and would follow contours (thus minimally changing existing topography). They

would not block views to or from the park, or to and from open spaces, and would be visually compatible with the park's existing features and trails.

Some of the proposed new trail segments would include fences or signs. All proposed fences and signs would have the same size, style, material, and character as the fences and signs that currently exist in the park, and would therefore be compatible with the surrounding area. Fences and signs associated with new trail segments would not block views or have a substantial visual effect.

Along with new and realigned trail segments, the MPU also recommends several new trailheads and staging points with kiosks and signage, and the installation of new shade structures, picnic tables, and benches within several areas of the park. New fences also would be constructed in many areas. Each of these park features would be designed or selected to match similar features already existing within the park, and kiosks and signs would be designed to follow the adopted Park Signage Program. These features would not require extensive grading, but would be placed on existing grades, and thus would not substantially change the natural topography in the areas where they would be placed. Depending on their placement, the features and furniture may be visible from public roads, open space areas in the park, and neighboring residential areas; however, the park furniture would be small in scale, particularly compared to the landforms surrounding them, and would not block views to or from significant visual landmarks or scenic vistas. They would not affect the existing visual character of the areas from which they would be seen or in which they would be placed because these features would be similar in bulk, scale, materials, and style to features currently existing in the park, and would be visually compatible to the surrounding park development.

The MPU includes recommendations for three new off-street parking lots, one at Barker Way (CM-F1), another north of Golfcrest Drive off Mission Gorge Road (CM-F2), and the third east of Father Junipero Serra Trail and the existing visitor center parking lot (MG-F6). Each of the proposed parking lots would be constructed either within a previously disturbed area or would be adjacent to existing development, and generally would conform to existing surface grades. Though they may require cut-and-fill grading to create a suitable parking lot surface with proper drainage, the lots generally would conform to existing topography, and their construction would not cause a substantial change to natural topography.

The lots would be visible from higher-elevation open space areas in the park, and within views from the park would be similar in appearance to nearby roadway(s). The visitor center lot also would be visually similar to the existing lot west of Father Junipero Serra Trail. The lot near Barker Way, CM-F1, would be near a residential neighborhood, but would be located at a slightly higher elevation than the abutting street, which would reduce its visibility from the neighboring residential area and roadways. The lot off Mission Gorge Road (CM-F2) would not be visible from residential areas because of existing slopes between the proposed location and the nearest residences, but it would be visible from Mission Gorge Road. The additional visitor center lot (MG-F6) would be accessed from Father Junipero Serra Trail entrance road to MTRP, and would be slightly lower in elevation than Mission Gorge Road, and set back from that major roadway. Only a small portion of the lot, if any, would be visible from Mission Gorge Road. It would not be visible from residential areas south of Mission Gorge Road.

Although these lots would be visible from open space areas, being surface features, they would not block views to or from roads, open space areas, or any significant visual landmarks or scenic vistas. Additionally, where visible, the lots would not affect the existing visual character of the park, the City, or the adjacent community plan areas because their visual character would be similar to adjacent and nearby roads and parking lots. Any additional features, such as signs, kiosks, light standards, fences, or other park furniture, would be similar in appearance, bulk, scale, materials, and style to—and thus visually compatible with—existing park features.

Lighting may be installed for parking lot safety, and to illuminate signs and kiosks. New light standards would be visually similar to existing lights within the park. Any lights would be installed per City codes, have cut-off shields to direct light away from open space areas and sensitive species, and avoid impact on night sky glare. New lighting may be powered with solar panels. If an individual solar panel is installed at each light standard, it would be integrated into the pole, thus minimizing its visual appearance. Each panel is designed to absorb as much light as possible, rather than reflect it.

Additional specific recommendations that may be visually noticeable include the following:

Lake Murray recommendation LM-P3 suggests an alternative use concept for the existing golf course. If implemented, the vegetation and physical amenities within the golf course would either remain or be replaced with visually similar facilities, and the visual effect would be minimal.

Lake Murray recommendation LM-H2 suggests the removal of dead, dying, and small eucalyptus trees, and the replacement of the eucalyptus trees with native trees. The removal of existing trees would be noticeable from within existing park areas and potentially visible from nearby residences, but the effect would be temporary, and the non-native trees would soon be replaced by native trees. The new native vegetation would have similar visual effects as the existing vegetation, and would similarly screen rather than blocking views. Additionally, the native trees would likely increase the visual continuity of the area with the surrounding natural environment, and thus would be compatible in terms of bulk and scale as well.

Cowles Mountain recommendation CM-P1 proposes pedestrian and bicycle facilities along the portion of Mesa Road bordering MTRP if the road is extended southward to connect to Lake Murray Boulevard. The inclusion of bicycle and pedestrian facilities would not create a substantial change compared to the installation of a roadway without pedestrian and bicycle facilities. The recommendation also suggests native landscaping along the roadway that would reduce the visual change and increase the continuity of the roadway with the visual environment of the park.

Cowles Mountain recommendation CM-F6 proposes repurposing the ranger residence, which is located off Mesa Road. The residence currently is not visible from public roadways (Mesa Road), but may be visible from residences to the northeast. The extent and purpose of the repurposing is yet to be determined, but if it is thoughtfully implemented and makes use of existing building(s) without substantially changing them, the visual impact would be minimal.

Cowles Mountain recommendation CM-F8 suggests modifying the current communication facilities at the top of the mountain to have a less visible profile. Implementation of this recommendation would reduce the visual contrast of the existing communication facilities, which have from some angles an imposing profile. The result would be an improvement in the visual environment of the immediate area, and would reduce the noticeability of the antennae area from afar.

Mission Gorge recommendation MG-F8 is for a permanent restroom at the Old Mission Dam staging area and would replace the existing portable toilets. This new facility would be smaller than other buildings within the park (e.g. the visitor center building), but larger than the existing portable units. It likely would be situated to make use of existing flat, graded areas, without substantially changing the existing topography, and would not block public views to or from any significant visual landmarks or scenic vistas. It would be visible from the staging area and parking lot, and a portion may be visible from Father Junipero Serra Trail. The new facility building would be similar in style and use of material as the visitor center and other facilities in the park, and therefore would blend more into the existing visual environment than does the portable facility, which visually contrasts with its surroundings. The new building therefore would not affect the visual character of the area, and would be compatible with the staging area and abutting open spaces. Any lighting associated with the permanent facility would be shielded and make use of cut-offs to limit impacts to night sky and reduce light spilling into adjacent habitat areas. If solar panels are used, they would be integrated into the structure's roof.

Mission Gorge recommendation MG-R4 proposes an all weather suspension or truss pedestrian and bicycle bridge across the San Diego River near the existing crossing trail. The proposed bridge is likely to have one middle truss in addition to the end supports, and generally would be designed to exclude motorized vehicles, though it may be wide enough for emergency access. A new bridge in this proposed location would generally be lower in elevation than the surrounding park areas, which would limit the points within the park that would see the bridge silhouette. The bridge is likely to be designed to minimize the footprints of the abutments, with few changes to the natural topography of the area. As such, no substantial change to the natural topography or ground surface relief features would occur. The bridge further would not be visible from public roadways, but would be visible from open space areas, mostly from points at higher elevations which look down at river gorge. The bridge, therefore, would not block views of any significant landmarks or scenic vistas. It would be a noticeable, new man-made feature in a mostly undeveloped area, but would be similar in character, design, materials, scale, and bulk to developed park features that visitors see while approaching the bridge (such as the visitor center). As such, it would not be incompatible with the surrounding development, and would not significantly affect the visual character of the area.

Any lights installed for safety on the bridge and bridge approach would be installed per City of San Diego night sky regulations and lit areas would be minimized to the bridge walking surface. All lights would be shielded from overspill into the adjacent natural areas.

Fortuna Mountain recommendation FM-F1 proposes the construction of the last phase of equestrian facilities. Implementation of this recommendation will be consistent with the previously certified environmental document and approved Site Development Permit and is not a part of this EIR.

Fortuna Mountain recommendation FM-F3 proposes reconstruction of the Old Mission Dam overlook. Implementation of this recommendation would repair damaged existing facilities and would not create visual contrast or have a visual effect on the area.

West Sycamore recommendation WS-F1 proposes to provide a restroom, ranger station, hitching posts, shade structures, and picnic tables at the existing staging area. The proposed building(s) and facilities would be located on a previously disturbed pad and would be similar in style and material to existing buildings and equestrian facilities in MTRP. The buildings would be smaller in scale than nearby residences, and may not be visible from the residential areas and roadways due to existing topography. If the features are visible from residences, they would be small scale features within a larger view that would not block or obstruct the view. The buildings and facilities would be located on an existing flat pad that previously supported buildings, which would ensure their construction would not substantially change the natural topography of the area. Any lighting associated with the facilities would be installed per City of San Diego codes and regulations, and would be shielded to prevent night sky impacts or spills into adjacent open space or sensitive habitat.

In summary, the proposed MTRP MPU/NRMP recommendations would not substantially change the topography within the park, overall or within specific areas, and no ground surface relief feature would be disrupted. Public views from designated open space areas and roads, to and from significant visual landmarks and scenic vistas within the park, would not be blocked or obscured. The proposed features would not affect the existing visual character of the City or community planning areas, because where visible from roadways, public viewing areas, vistas, or open spaces, the proposed features would be visually compatible with the surrounding park features, open spaces, and development due to their similar bulk, scale, materials, and style. New lights would be installed per City of San Diego codes and regulations, and would be shielded to reduce night sky impacts, impacts to aviation, and spillage into habitat areas. If any solar panels are included to power the proposed lights and new features, they would be integrated into roofs and light standards, which would reduce their visible prominence and ensure that they are visually compatible with the park and its facilities.