

Fred Watson comments read at Marina Council 4/20/21 re: Hilltop Park

Thank you, Mr. Mayor

I've worked on planning issues in and around Hilltop Park with city staff, developer, and consultants since 2013. Together - and particularly in the last year - we've successfully addressed a number of goals at Hilltop Park, including ocean views, views toward the Fort Ord National Monument, the FORTAG trail, trail connectivity in general, accessibility from the north side, and the multipurpose trail along 9th St. I think the plans are now in good shape from the **trails** standpoint.

We've made great progress, and this conceptual plan already does a wonderful job of reflecting the Specific Plan in **almost all most** respects. But I think there's still one issue to be worked out with respect to **native plants**.

There's a difference between California natives and Fort Ord natives – sometimes a big difference (e.g. Western Redbud). The Specific Plan addresses this, and ultimately I think it affects the prospects of a successful restoration that stays in a native state.

With respect to Specific Plan goal for this park to emphasize native plants, the plan so far basically amounts to the developer hydroseeding with fairly generic California native plants, and then leaving it to the city to attempt to maintain whatever grows there - which could include a lot of weeds, given the disturbed soils at the site. This falls short with respect to being sufficiently native to the Fort Ord Maritime Chaparral environment, and with respect to providing sufficient likelihood of long-term success that doesn't essentially require the city to start from scratch if weeds take over the hydro-seeded areas.

I think it is important to recall what the EIR and Specific Plan said about these points.

The Specific Plan (2004, Page 120) is to include "native species grown from on-site stock". It states that "planting areas will include plants grown from stock originating from the greater Fort Ord territory" to the extent possible. It states that Hilltop Park should exhibit "native vegetation" achieved through "native planting" (Pages 37 and 51).

The EIR described what constitutes native vegetation at the site. It characterized the site as Maritime Chaparral and mapped three special status species that occur widely on Ft Ord but not elsewhere and not in plan before you tonight – two of which are maritime chaparral shrubs (Monterey Spineflower, Monterey Ceanothus, and Sandmat Manzanita) (DEIR 2005 Vol II App C Plate 1). My informal reconnaissance in Nov 2020 counted 13 species native to this part of Fort Ord (not including Monterey Pine and Monterey Cypress, which are ornamental trees that are not native to this area).

A quick side note: In its natural condition in 1937, the only place on this site that exhibited trees was essentially where the trees are now on the northeast flank of the hill, and these trees were almost certainly Coast Live Oaks. The rest of the site was shrubs - because that's all that could grow naturally in this sandy, windy environment. This is what is evident in aerial photography of the area from 1937. In consideration of use of the site for tree mitigation, one would need to consider whether the removed trees were native to Fort Ord, whether the replacement trees are native to Fort Ord, and whether they would grow naturally in this area that is designated in the Specific Plan to be naturally vegetated.

Back to my main thread: Subsequent to my reconnaissance where I observed 13 native plant species, about 80% of the park area was graded, and this destroyed the soils and some of the remaining native vegetation, including some special status plants (e.g. Sandmat Manzanita, on the CDFW CRPR list). This grading makes it

more difficult to achieve the Specific Plan objectives and I think necessitates a little more thought. The hydroseeding mix doesn't include maritime chaparral species. You can't restore maritime chaparral on disturbed weed-ridden soil with a generic native hydroseeding mix. You need a more nuanced restoration approach. Fortunately, there are restoration firms working right now on Fort Ord who have a lot experience with this kind of thing

I've informed staff of these issues at a few points in the last few months and we had been working through them in a series of productive meetings with staff and the developer. It was a bit of a surprise to me to see the item come before council tonight. I think we need to hit pause for moment and tune this plan up a **little** bit more in order for it to accurately reflect the intent of the specific plan in light of the current state of the site, and in order to come up with a plan that is likely to succeed and not result in the park becoming a weedy eyesore at the city's expense. Thank you.