

Meeting minutes
Ballona Creek Watershed Task Force
June 17, 2003

The meeting began at 1:30 P.M. We introduced ourselves, and Brian White asked the group's approval of May's meeting minutes. Minutes were approved without revision.

Committee Reports:

The Funding Committee (Lu Plauzoles, chair) did not meet this month. Lu proposed a meeting on July 23, if members are available.

The Steering Committee (Wing Tam) had a second field trip with the consulting team, visiting the Baldwin Hills with the Conservancy's director, David McNeill. Wing noted that our consulting team brought copies of the Draft Management Plan for initial comments. Everyone please respond to Michael Drennan or Mark Horne by July 23, or sooner.

The Monitoring Committee (Angie Bera) did not meet in May, but there was a successful April training and water sampling event on May 17, with many participants. Ann Dalkey is conducting tests and results are pending. Perhaps there can be a presentation to the task force later in summer. Angie also reported on a Regional Water Quality Control Board meeting in which Reaches I and II of Ballona Creek were redesignated for recreation uses, from R1 to R2, and from R1 to Limited Recreation. In the proceedings, the regional board acknowledged the work of this task force and expressed optimism that the outcome of our work will have a constructive and influential role in future proceedings of the regional board. Angie also urged us to define a vision for Ballona Creek, draw a picture or list three things that are important about its future.

Michael Drennan expressed support for the visioning process. With others present in the room, he helped establish the Los Angeles and San Gabriel Rivers Watersheds Council. The vision process was very helpful in getting the organization to focus and move forward over time. We should discuss the possibility of developing a vision in the future.

Presentation: Playa Vista's Freshwater Marsh; Catherine Tyrrell and Edith Read.

The Freshwater Marsh is 26 acres in size. Playa Vista has restored or improved approximately 18 acres to date, with the balance of the project area to be addressed in the near future. In addition to the freshwater marsh, a 25-acre riparian corridor will also be constructed. Together they comprise a 51-acre freshwater wetlands system.

The riparian corridor runs east and west along the bluff, below Loyola Marymount University. Once planting and restoration efforts are complete, the 51 acre property will be maintained in perpetuity. True riparian areas are being restored with wetland plants, while upland areas have been planted with willows, sycamore, etc. There will be a functioning connection under Lincoln Blvd. to the freshwater marsh. Additionally, a spillway connects the freshwater marsh to the saltwater marsh.

Three basic goals of the project include habitat protection, stormwater management, and flood management.

Habitat Protection

- Freshwater marsh is bordered at north by Jefferson Blvd.

- Roadway includes three storm drain outlets that drain into the marsh.
- 3,000 trees and 10,000 shrubs or flowering plants, so far.
- Native plant palette to increase from 25 to 100 species
- Playa Vista has increased plant diversity as part of the design process
- Lincoln Blvd. improvements include a bicycle trail, a bioswale along the roadway's edge, and a central median landscaped with native plants.

Storm Water Management

- A "treatment train," in effect.
- New residential buildings include subterranean parking and trash storage, minimizing the exposure of oil leaks and garbage to the elements.
- CalTrans work on Lincoln Blvd. includes multiple catch basins a CDS unit, new storm drains with trash racks at outlets, and new trash nets installed on the inlets to the marsh.

Flood Management

- Ballona Creek continues to provide regional flood protection.
- The freshwater marsh also has the capacity to handle drainage area flood waters.

Additionally, pedestrian access will be provided along the marsh interpretative trail, on the multi-use path, and on sidewalks along the east side of Lincoln Blvd. Docent-led tours are also available on every other weekend along the inner berm of the freshwater marsh. Meeting participants expressed concern about the difficulty of accessing the parking now available on the south side of Jefferson Blvd. The site is accessible by bicycle and transit.

Plants have grown substantially since project planting was completed, in November of 2002.

With regard to wildlife, weekly monitoring began in May, 2003. There is evidence of nesting and breeding birds; 49 species of native birds, 13 nesting pair. Through established performance criteria, Playa Vista is required to provide habitat for 12 species within 5 years; project implementation has exceeded this goal in one year. Non-native species are also flourishing (e.g., two Mute Swans). Playa Vista is working with The Acorn Group to develop an interpretive program.

Stakeholder concerns:

Marcia Hanscom, Sierra Club:

Among the science and natural resources community, there are concerns that individual components are not consistent with real wetland functions. There is no mixing system between the salt and fresh water. Instead, the creek runs into a pond, and the saltwater marsh is disjointed, making the natural interrelationship of ecosystems unfilled by the project.

Response: Clarification of project function; the freshwater marsh does indeed spill over into the saltwater marsh area directly to the west during the 1 year design storm,. Once the saltmarsh is restored to receive tidal flow adjacent and just west of the freshwater marsh, the kind of brackish conditions that should occur ONLY during winter storm conditions will exist again. But year around contact between freshwater and saltwater habitat is generally considered to be a negative. That occurred at the old Jefferson drain outlet and the result has been the freshening of the saltmarsh – not to mention the introduction of non-natives to the saltmarsh system. Additionally, without a separation between the freshwater stormwater treatment system and the saltwater tides of the Ballona Channel, the level of treatment of water desired before entering the Channel would not occur.

Lu Plauzoles, Los Angeles Chapter of Audubon Society: What is the level of manpower investment required?

Response: Three to ten employees are working on the project. Edith Read is the only full-time employee, with two part-time employees; others on call, as needed. Weed (invasive plant) removal is the most challenging function. Another problem is the continuous inflow of garbage, blowing in on the breeze.

Arthur Golding: What is the source of funding?

Response: Playa Vista home owners and businesses, through various mechanisms, pay into a monitoring and maintenance fund. Next year, a non-profit conservancy will come into effect.

James Alamillo, Heal the Bay: What level of monitoring is attached to the project? Is there a water quality health index established? Or more complex monitoring based upon individual species, such as invertebrates?

Response: A very detailed water quality, vegetation, and bird monitoring program was required as a function of project approval. That program does not include monitoring of invertebrates. However, that information is being noted incidentally .

James Alamillo (continuing): When will the induced vegetation need to be pulled (removed), or cycled through?

Response: It is anticipated that plant material will be healthy for a long period of time. It is anticipated that dredging will need to occur within the pretreatment areas about every 5 to 20 years., In the long term, sediment build-up within the pretreatment areas , not plant uptake is of greater concern.

James Alamillo (continuing): Is water quality monitoring occurring for individual resources, such as in the marsh and creek?

Response: Yes, Playa Vista has conducted its first water quality monitoring this April at a number of locations within the marsh including at the inlets and near the outlet structure., The initial results look very good This data will be provided in a report to the various permitting agencies and then will be made available to the public.

Marcia Hanscom: Vegetation within landscaping efforts is not native. What is the possibility of using native species at Playa Vista in the future?

Response: Project approval required the use of 50% native and drought tolerant species in landscaping. Many years ago, the project landscape architects proposed (and city officials approved) a conceptual palette comprised as the "best of Los Angeles," including palm trees and other non-native species. These trees have been purchased and have been growing off site for a number of years. Now, for the next phase Playa Vista is putting much more emphasis on planning for, if not natives, at least non-invasive plantings and trees. There is much greater awareness and concern that natural areas need to be kept free of non-native and invasive species. In the long term, maintenance needs will be minimized if more native species are planted and maintained. Playa Vista has become more active in reviewing landscape planting plans for subcontractors now.

Mark Horne: What is the flood management threshold to which the project was designed?

Response: a one-year storm. (actually the freshwater marsh will allow the 1-year design storms to flow to the saltmarsh, but the system over all will be protective of housing and roads from the 100-year storm.)

Consideration of Draft Project Selection Criteria:

Michael Drennan circulated a couple of handouts:

- (1) a watershed project matrix, using a spreadsheet initially established by the Funding Committee. There were many holes in the matrix, but as a result of an e-mail inquiry, Michael received helpful clarifications by members of the task force.

(2) a priorities list as one deliverable under contract with the county. This is a preliminary list with project selection criteria, plus a list of project recommendations. A structure and framework are needed to help define specific goals. A one-page summary of projects was developed by this task force, but we need to narrow the list to no more than eight projects. In order to attract funders, we need to be specific and attach design concepts. The list circulated by the consulting team is not a recommendation; just a proposal to encourage more focus. Generally, the task force should consider projects, apply the criteria, rank projects and move the top eight forward.

One suggestion was to get the priority list moved to the Proposition 40 committee, so BMP list developers can add projects to the list of projects eligible for funding. (James Alamillo) However, the consulting team noted that funders won't want to choose from our list. We need to define priorities among ourselves, and those that fulfill multiple objectives and benefits are likely to be awarded funding.

Another concern was that we don't have a lot of expertise in the room. We need help to define the best approach, with objective input. Should we form a scientific advisory group? Prior restoration efforts (outside the Ballona Creek watershed) were not always successful. (Marcia Hanscom) It was noted that the consulting team includes two biologists, who will draw from prior research within the watershed.

Co-chairs were asked for clarification of the BMP evaluation process. (Kathleen Bullard, MRCA) The county was awarded a Proposition 13 grant to define its objectives. Ballona Creek was selected as the pilot watershed. The intent is to develop a monitoring plan. Funds were not awarded for construction or monitoring; just a model. Los Angeles County will be lead agency, pending finalization of a contract.

Technical expertise is important, but the task force is in a much stronger, more independent position to propose real solutions. There is an array of hard versus soft solutions, policies and priorities. A vision is very important; stated clearly. (Arthur Golding)

The process requires refinement, but a more fundamental need is for us to build a case for specific project objectives. (Michael Drennan)

We also need to focus on what's possible today, recognizing constraints in effect. Native habitat is scarce along the creek, while some landowners have "built" nature into discrete projects. We need to focus on improvements that we can achieve. (Mark Horne)

We must address water quality impairments in the final document; need to understand problem spots. (James Alamillo). The consulting team noted that the two-page summary specifically addresses water quality. Stakeholders are asked to expand the group knowledge by asking themselves questions such as, what is the problem? Is it fairly limited? Where is it? What can we accomplish in trying to resolve it?

Implementation projects must be clearly stated as a result of this process, but too strong a focus on criteria may taint the ultimate selection process. We must respect the criteria established water agencies and authorities. We can't lose sight of agreed upon standards. (Guang-yu Wang)

Ideally, this group should become key to making decisions on implementation projects. Perhaps the simplest way to respond to this exercise is to ask oneself, if there was one project that is more important than any other, what would it look like when completed? (Mark Horne and Michael Drennan)

We need to focus on projects that capture the public's attention; for example, people relate better to warm, fuzzy animals. If we can bring back rare, threatened or endangered species, restore sea otter habitat and succeed in returning them to southern California coastal waters, that might inspire others. (Marcia Hanscom)

Please review the list of projects that was circulated to stakeholders earlier by Michael Drennan, via e-mail. Let us know if you didn't receive or no longer have the list. Think about long-term goals and how these projects might resonate with task force members. (Mark Horne)

For funding purposes, the dichotomy of the upper and lower portions of the watershed might be useful. The lower portion has the greater potential for restoration, and may be more salable, or marketable to funders, while the upper section has a great need for open space, and needs that should be served. (Lu Plauzoles and Jim Lamm)

The selection criteria should include "functioning habitat." Start with that issue, and the rest will flow from the effort. Small systems create the whole watershed. (Ann Dalkey)

Stakeholders were asked to mark up copies of handouts and return them to Michael Drennan. E-mail responses are welcome.

Business Items

Brian White announced that a public meeting will be scheduled for Tuesday, July 15, 6:30 to 9:00 P.M., and advertised. This meeting will supplement that regular monthly stakeholder meeting earlier in the day. The location will most likely be a city-owned facility where Council District 11 occasionally holds meetings, near the intersection of Sepulveda and Manchester. Wing Tam is currently seeking authorization to use the facility. Another option is to use the second floor conference room at the Hyperion wastewater treatment facility. However, there were some concerns that security measures might make access to the facility difficult for the general public. Co-chairs were advised to develop a flyer for e-mail distribution, so that stakeholders can help spread word of the meeting.

MaLisa Martin, U.S. Army Corps of Engineers, circulated handouts about the Corps' Reconnaissance Study. The Corps is still looking for a local sponsor to match funding for a project on Ballona Creek. A cost sharing agreement is needed before any work can begin. The Corps is thinking about daylighting streams and other projects that might be of interest to this group.

Marcia Hanscom announced that the Governor's action is required to authorize acquisition funding on the Ballona Wetlands. There is some controversy over the price of land, but we should rely on the appraisal process for clarity. Appraisals will prove that action will be in the public's best interest. Stakeholders were urged to write, mail or fax a letter to the Governor's office; no e-mail, please. CC's to the Sierra Club would be appreciated. Also, Marcia will soon make a presentation concerning "the other side" of the Playa Vista freshwater marsh story.

Arthur Golding reported that the June 18 meeting of the Los Angeles and San Gabriel Rivers Watershed Council will include a presentation about native plant landscaping standards which are currently being revised by the City of Los Angeles. The watershed council has been active in this effort. The new standards will have ramifications and influence over any future work on county-owned land along Ballona Creek.

Jim Lamm announced that we have previously discussed the idea of forming an education and outreach committee, which might be very helpful in supporting the task force's mission. So far, no one has volunteered to chair this effort. If anyone is interested in volunteering, please contact Jim.

Meeting adjourned.