

Midcoast Community Council

*An elected Advisory Council to the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors
representing Montara, Moss Beach, El Granada, Princeton, and Miramar*
PO Box 248, Moss Beach, CA 94038-0248 | midcoastcommunitycouncil.org

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October 25, 2023

To: San Mateo County Board of Supervisors
Ray Mueller, Supervisor, San Mateo County District 3
Steve Monowitz, Director, SMC Planning and Building
Shruti Dhapodkar, Director, SMC Department of Emergency Management
Ann Stillman, Director, SMC Department of Public Works

Re. McNee Ranch State Park/Montara Mountain North Peak Access Road Maintenance

Dear San Mateo County Board of Supervisors,

The Midcoast Community Council represents the unincorporated communities of Montara, Moss Beach, El Granada, Princeton, and Miramar. We have received many complaints and concerns from the public regarding the recent emergency maintenance work on the Montara Mountain North Peak Access Road. We are concerned that the history of maintenance to the road and the recent work on the road in May and June, has been damaging to this sensitive and unique area and continues to be handled inadequately to preserve and protect the parks, and instead creates some of the very issues it purports to address, especially erosion from stormwater runoff.

Montara Mountain, a local landmark, unique and sensitive habitat, and public park

Residents and visitors to McNee Ranch State Park know it as Montara Mountain, and they traverse the road to the peak and have been doing so for decades. It is a recreational trail for users of all three parks (McNee Ranch SP, San Pedro Valley County Park, and GGNRA). From the road, visitors experience the beauty of the landscape and views from the higher elevation that are unmatched on the midcoast, where on a clear day one can see Pacifica, San Francisco, the Farallons, Pillar Point Harbor and the ocean to the south, west, and northwest. The public often doesn't realize that the park is contiguous with other parcels and includes McNee Ranch State Park, Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA) land, the North County Coast Water District (NCCWD) which is leased to San Mateo County, San Francisco Public Utilities Commission (SFPUC), and San Mateo County Parks. This is unfortunate, because not all landowner stakeholders are good stewards nor do they seem to care or consider its historical, ecological or recreational value. The peak itself has been damaged and continues to be degraded by the SFPUC and the multiple communications leasees that are allowed to place communications apparatus there.

California State Parks describes the area as “the only undisturbed coastal mountain habitat found on over 100 miles of coastline. It is an ecological island of natural biological diversity. Its steep slopes have minimized human impact, making it home to plant and animal communities found nowhere else in the world.”

What happened and what is now needed?

The planning and physical maintenance of the North Peak Access Road this year was carried out by the San Mateo County Department of Emergency Management (DEM) with PG&E equipment and operators. SMC DEM’s analysis of options in the project report clearly indicates this project was characterized and pursued as an emergency for economic reasons and expediency, not because it was a dire emergency. In fact the focus seems to have been on characterizing this project in such a way as to secure partial government funding set aside specifically for damages incurred from the spring storms.

Instead of careful planning, collaboration, and caution to ensure the project would be handled well, with sensitivity and appropriate care of the landscape, the County took a heavy handed and irresponsible approach with a minimum of input and preparation. The process and the result is concerning and has prompted numerous complaints from the community, including one letter printed in the Pacifica Tribune from a young boy scout who said “I have always loved looking at all of the little organisms that live along the edges of the trail, and it is sad to know that many of them are gone. I hope that better solutions can be found in the future.”

This isn’t the first time road maintenance has occurred, and yet there is no ongoing maintenance plan, no continuity or learning from previous road maintenance, and the County ignored the San Mateo County Resource Conservation District’s best management practices, [“The Central Coast Private Roads Maintenance Guide”](#) in which San Mateo County Department of Public Works is listed as a resource. There is also a guide recommended by the State, published by the University of California, Division of Agriculture and Natural Resources, of best practices entitled [“Rural Roads: A Construction and Maintenance Guide for California Landowners.”](#)

The result of this road maintenance project was excessive shoulder clearing that damaged slope edges and large amounts of vegetation were removed indiscriminately. There seems to have been no thought given to the spread of invasive species that tend to invade in areas of soil disturbance. The grading in some areas has created the potential for increased erosion and poor drainage during future storm events. McNee Ranch State Park is an area of unique and sensitive habitats, including several species of concern, and there is potential for significant impact to plant communities and wildlife.

In light of the unfortunate way this project was handled and the concerns expressed by the public, the MCC requests that the County work with CA State Parks in the near term, to create a plan to restore shoulder areas where excessive clearing damaged slope edges. The plan should include a strategy to mitigate any invasive plants that may have spread or been introduced by this work. We ask that the County address areas where grading created potential for erosion and poor drainage, before the rainy season gets fully underway. We also recommend a follow up assessment of impact from the road maintenance and creation of a regular maintenance plan that focuses on care of the park as a primary goal and that takes into account all previous

maintenance efforts, identifies lessons learned, and includes documented best practices and an educational component that ensures those who implement road maintenance work are properly trained and managed. The maintenance plan should afford an opportunity for public comment and for local citizen involvement. Further we ask the County to pay for all the work outlined above to rectify the issues it has created.

Identified issues and possible solutions

The primary problem is a conflict in the use of Montara Mountain as a site for communications infrastructure that is deemed critical because there are no redundancies or alternative infrastructure to serve the San Mateo coastside. Given the vulnerabilities to reliance on this site, alternative infrastructure solutions need to be identified and implemented. This would seem to be in line with San Mateo County's CRISP initiative, to identify, develop, and implement reliable and redundant communications infrastructure to serve the unincorporated areas and Half Moon Bay. This kind of change takes long-range planning, and with the current infrastructure momentum and funding at the federal and state levels, there is an opportunity to begin the process. We recommend this objective—to alleviate the need for reliance on communications infrastructure on Montara Mountain—be prioritized as a long-term goal.

In the short term there remains a conflict in terms of differing stakeholder views of the purpose of the road and how to maintain it. We ask that the road first and foremost be considered as part of the park, integrated with its natural biological resources, and as a recreational resource. As such, there should be appropriate monitoring and care taken to perform any future maintenance in a way that protects the sensitive habitat, ecosystems, endangered and at risk species, and the natural and scenic value of the area.

We note that multinational American Tower Corporation (ATC), has a pending application for undergrounding electric lines which service equipment on their parcel. The ATC agreement with the County expires in 2026. This agreement outlines the County's portion of cost and role in road repair. We ask the County to reconsider this contract with an eye towards park conservation, and to explore other less damaging ways for ATC to access its parcel. Similarly, SFPUC has an alternative route to access its small parcel and has greater resources than the County, to repair and maintain its access on watershed lands which have stronger protections that it would be required to follow.

Conservation of Montara Mountain

In response to the outpouring of community comment that we have received, the MCC encourages all stakeholders to consider a long-range plan for eventual removal of the communications equipment and infrastructure and to return the peak to a natural state in keeping with conservation of this remaining ecosystem as a complete protected area for future generations. We want to avoid the sad fate of San Bruno Mountain where ATC has essentially paved over the ridge top with a parking lot and the area is rife with invasives. The unique ecosystem and biological diversity of this area will survive longer if it is stewarded as a complete landscape rather than being vulnerable as individual parcels to the whims of individual stakeholders with objectives that conflict with protection of this much loved coastal northern spur of the Santa Cruz Mountains.

Sincerely,

MIDCOAST COMMUNITY COUNCIL
s/Gregg Dieguez, Chair

cc: David Barnett, PSC??
Linda Hitchcock, California State Parks
David Smith, Golden Gate National Recreation Area, National Park Service
Nicolas Calderon, San Mateo County Parks
Tim Ramirez, SFPUC Natural Resources and Lands Management Division Manager
Dan Carl, North Central Coast District Director, CA Coastal Commission

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