



Midpeninsula Regional
Open Space District

R-12-13
Meeting 12-04
January 25, 2012

AGENDA ITEM 4

AGENDA ITEM

Tentative Approval of an Amendment to the Use and Management Plan for Russian Ridge Open Space Preserve and Acceptance of the Mindego Gateway Project Description for Purposes of Environmental Review Pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act

GENERAL MANAGER'S RECOMMENDATIONS

1. Tentatively approve an amendment to the Use and Management Plan for Russian Ridge Open Space Preserve to construct a Commemorative Site, a 20-stall paved parking lot, a multi-use trail connecting the staging area to the Ancient Oaks Trail, a hiking/equestrian trail to the peak of Mindego Hill, and close a section of the existing Mindego Ridge Trail to bicycles, which are all components of the Mindego Gateway Project.
2. Accept the Use and Management Plan Amendment as the Mindego Gateway Project Description and direct staff to proceed with environmental review pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA).

SUMMARY

The proposed Mindego Gateway Project (Project), a partnership between Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District (District) and Peninsula Open Space Trust (POST), would provide public access to the Mindego area of Russian Ridge Open Space Preserve. The proposed Project would consist of a Commemorative Site honoring the work of former POST president Audrey Rust; a new staging area, including a 20-stall parking lot, a vault restroom, trailhead connections, and signage; a new 1.2 mile multi-use trail from the staging area north to the Ancient Oaks Trail; a new hiking and equestrian trail to the summit of Mindego Hill; and closure of a one-way segment of Mindego Ridge Trail to bicycle use for the protection of San Francisco garter snake. These project elements and recommendations for trail use were reviewed and approved by the Use and Management Committee in October and November 2011, respectively. An amendment to the Russian Ridge Comprehensive Use and Management Plan and CEQA review is required prior to adoption of the proposed facilities and uses. Tentative approval of the amendment and acceptance of the project description by the Board will allow environmental review to proceed. The amendment will return to the Board for final approval following public review of the environmental documents.

BACKGROUND

Mindego Ranch, a 1,100-acre working cattle ranch dominated by the prominent grassy peak of Mindego Hill, was acquired by the District from POST in 2008. The acquisition of this property increased the size of Russian Ridge Open Space Preserve by one-third and significantly enhanced its biological and cultural resource value. Mindego Lake, a large permanent pond 1,500 feet northwest of Mindego Hill, supports a robust population of the endangered San Francisco garter snake. The San Francisco garter snake is known from fewer than ten populations statewide and is considered a Fully Protected, or “no take” species, which is the highest level of regulatory protection under the California Fish and Game code. In addition, early archaeological survey work indicates that Mindego Lake and nearby major springs may have supported a significant Native American community. Allowing public access to this conservation landmark is a high priority for both the District and POST. However, careful planning is needed to ensure that proposed low-intensity development and public use of the property is protective of these unique resources.

The recent acquisition of the former Silva property brought with it a level, graded area adjacent to both Alpine Road and the Mindego Ridge Trailhead that can accommodate a new staging and parking area to support the opening of Mindego Hill for public use. Consistent with the goals for acquiring the Silva property, the Board adopted a preliminary Use and Management Plan that included provisions for the District to study the feasibility of POST-sponsored public access facilities at this location. To date these facilities, collectively referred to as the Mindego Gateway Project, include a recognition site landscape feature, or Commemorative Site, honoring former POST president Audrey Rust; a public staging area/parking lot; two connector trails; and a change in trail use for a segment of the Mindego Ridge Trail. During the summer of 2011, the District Board of Directors approved the proposed Mindego Gateway Project as a new Key Project for the Fiscal Year 2011-12 Action Plan, created a series of design guidelines for the Audrey Rust Commemorative Site (to be designed and constructed by POST), and authorized contracts with a team of consultants, including landscape architects, CEQA specialists, and biologists to plan and design the staging area and trail connections (see Reports R-11-82, 86, and 87). The proposed project would be entirely funded by POST. .

Use and Management Committee Review

Conceptual designs for the staging/parking area, a new connector trail to the Ancient Oaks Trail to the north, and a new trail from the Mindego Ridge Trail to the peak of Mindego Hill, were reviewed and approved by the Use and Management Committee at an onsite meeting in October 2011. Three members of the public were in attendance. At a subsequent meeting in November, the Use and Management Committee reviewed and approved trail use recommendations for the proposed Mindego Hill Trail and Ancient Oaks Connector Trail, as well as a change in trail use to a segment along the Mindego Ridge Trail to exclude bicycle use for protection of the San Francisco garter snake. Six members of the public were present, four of whom voiced concerns about the proposed restriction on bicycle access on the new Mindego Hill Trail and portions of the existing, multi-use Mindego Ridge Trail.

DISCUSSION

The Mindego Gateway Project is being brought to the Board for review and tentative approval as an Amendment to the Comprehensive Use and Management Plan for Russian Ridge Open Space

Preserve. The Board is also asked to accept this tentative Use and Management Plan Amendment as the project description, which will be used to prepare the environmental documents for public review pursuant to CEQA.

The goal of the proposed Mindego Gateway Project is to introduce ecologically sensitive public access to the Mindego Hill area of Russian Ridge Open Space Preserve, and to commemorate the work of former POST president Audrey Rust (refer to Attachment A for a Project overview map). Elements of the Project include:

Commemorative Site (Attachment B)

The Audrey Rust landscape commemorative feature would be sited on a grassy knoll overlooking the Mindego Area, with sweeping views across both grasslands and forested terrain towards the Pacific Ocean. The Board approved the Design Guidelines for the Commemorative Site and authorized the District to support the design development of the Commemorative Site on July 13, 2011 (R-11-76). The proposed design includes a pathway from the proposed staging area, which winds westward to a large, paved viewing platform where interpretive signage provides information about POST, the mission to preserve land, the Mindego region, as well as other educational and cultural content. From the upper viewing platform, concrete steps descend to a raised concrete plank walkway, which terminates at wood deck viewing and painting/viewing platforms. Simple, elegant wood benches will complement both platforms. The materials selected are harmonious with the surroundings, sustainable long-term, and easy to maintain. The Commemorative Site would provide a wonderful location for visitors to enjoy the spectacular views towards Mindego Hill and the Pacific Ocean.

Staging Area (Attachment C)

The Mindego Gateway staging/parking area would provide a key access point for visitors to the Mindego region of the Preserve. The staging area would be located approximately 1.4 miles south of Skyline Boulevard, along Alpine Road. Award of the landscape design contract for the staging area was approved by the Board on August 24, 2011 (R-11-86). The staging area would include an asphalt concrete paved parking area for eighteen (18) standard and two (2) Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) accessible spaces; a single vault restroom structure; Preserve signage, connection to the Commemorative Site; access north to the new Ancient Oaks trail connection; and trail access south to the existing Mindego Ridge trail.

Due to the extent of new impervious surface area that will be created, the new staging area would be required to comply with Regional Water Quality Control Board "C-3" requirements to address storm water runoff. Compliance would be achieved with bio-retention basins that detain and filter storm water to mitigate design-storm-event conditions. The new C-3 requirements would obligate the District to inspect the site runoff treatment features annually, issue inspection reports, and pay an annual \$100 fee to the County. Every five years, the County would conduct an on-site inspection to confirm that the treatment features are performing as designed.

Trails (Attachment D)

Two new trails are proposed as part of the Mindego Gateway Project: 1) the Mindego Hill Trail, a 0.75-mile long spur from the Mindego Ridge Trail to the summit of Mindego Hill, and 2) the Ancient Oaks Connector Trail, a 1.2-mile connector from the proposed staging area north to the Ancient Oaks Trail. The trails were designed by staff and the District's consulting engineering geologist and were approved by the Use and Management Committee in October 2011. The proposed alignments avoid potential geological hazards and steep grades, and are situated to maximize distance to sensitive aquatic habitat areas.

Trail Use

With all existing ten miles of trail on Russian Ridge currently open to multi-use (including bicycles), typical District practice would be to assign this designation to any new trail on the Preserve. However, given the presence of the San Francisco garter snake, a “Fully Protected” endangered species, specifically in the Mindego area of the property, the Use and Management Committee requested that a habitat assessment and management recommendations be prepared to inform the trail use decision-making process. The requirements under the “Fully Protected” designation are extremely stringent, such that no individual can be subject to “take” (e.g. harm or death). Biological consultants with expertise in both Fully Protected species and the San Francisco garter snake were contracted by the District to prepare the habitat assessment. To date, the consultants have prepared a biotic report analyzing potential impacts of the proposed trails on San Francisco garter snake. The impact analysis is based on fall surveys of aquatic habitat on Mindego Ranch, prior biological surveys performed in the area, and the known habitat requirements and life history traits of the San Francisco garter snake. District observations were also included in the analysis; since acquisition of Mindego Ranch in 2008, nearly 40 observations of San Francisco garter snake have been documented on the property, including three observations on roads and trails. In April 2009, trained District staff observed a snake on the gravel, road-width Mindego Ridge Trail. Current District guidelines for the Mindego area limit all vehicle use to a 5 mph speed limit, and require a “spotter” to precede vehicles near aquatic habitat.

According to the impact analysis, the greatest risk to San Francisco garter snakes is within and near aquatic feeding habitat, thus highlighting the need to keep areas that surround ponds closed to public use. Garter snakes are also known to disperse widely between aquatic habitat areas, and frequently bask on roads and trails where they risk the possibility of being run over by bicycles and vehicles. There is documented and anecdotal evidence that underscores the potential for harm or mortality to snakes by vehicles and mountain bikes. In cases reported by the US Fish and Wildlife Service, for example, San Francisco garter snakes were run over by a bicycle near Crystal Spring Reservoir¹, and a vehicle near the San Francisco airport². Additionally, mountain cyclists have cited instances to District staff where they have accidentally run over snakes. Given the unique regulatory status of this species, special protective measures are necessary to avoid the loss of even one snake.

The proposed Mindego Hill Trail, given its proximity to nearby ponds and known snake observation sites, would therefore be designated hiking and equestrian use only. It is not appropriate for the District to consider bicycle use for this trail even with speed limit restrictions or seasonal use restrictions since full enforcement is not feasible. Due to the documented sighting of a San Francisco garter snake on the gravel road known as Mindego Ridge Trail, which leads to the base of Mindego Hill, the designated trail use for an existing 1-mile section of Mindego Ridge Trail would change to close this segment of trail to bicycle use (the trail would remain open to hiking and equestrian use). Farther to the east and further away from aquatic habitat, staff recommends designating the proposed Ancient Oaks Connector Trail as multi-use (including bicycles) and retaining the remaining eastern portion of the Mindego Ridge Trail as a multi use trail. This would create a spectacular loop trail for all users. The result is no net loss of trail mileage to bicycle use in the Preserve.

¹ San Francisco Garter Snake (*Thamnophis sirtalis tetrataenia*) 5-Year Review: Summary and Evaluation (September 2006). U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service. Page 7.

² “BART-to-SFO work delayed / Squashed endangered garter snake quashes progress on extension.” Michael Cabanatuan, San Francisco Chronicle (May 11, 2002)

PROPOSED USE AND MANAGEMENT PLAN AMENDMENT FOR TENTATIVE APPROVAL

Public Access: Construct a 20-car parking lot; a single, unisex vault toilet restroom; signboards; and Sudden Oak Death tire and boot cleaning station. Construct 1.2 miles of multiple-use trail; construct a 0.75-mile trail to Mindego Hill with access limited to hiking and equestrian use; install a new gate and signage along Mindego Ridge Trail at the junction with Mindego Creek Trail (approximately 0.5 miles from Alpine Road), and limit trail use west of the new gate to equestrians and hikers.

Patrol: Routinely patrol the parking lot and new trails in the Preserve. Enforce “No Parking After Preserve Hours” at the new parking lot.

Signs: Install a regulatory sign at the parking lot trailhead; trail directional signs as needed; standard Preserve signboards; a Preserve entrance sign; and educational and interpretative signage. Signage proposed for the Commemorative Site includes POST information and dedication of site honoring Audrey Rust. Signage locations and content, as well as trail naming, associated with the dedication will be brought to the District Legislative, Funding and Public Affairs (LFPAC) Committee shortly for review and approval.

Barriers: Install a new Preserve gate at the parking lot entrance; a gate barrier leading to the special event parking area; stiles consistent with trail uses at new trail connections; double split-rail fencing at either side of the main entrance gate; and single split-rail fencing along the southern perimeter of the parking lot.

FISCAL IMPACT

The Mindego Gateway Project is being funded through a District partnership with POST. POST is paying for all consultant fees associated with the preparation of the CEQA documentation and associated support surveys.

PUBLIC NOTICE

Property owners of land located adjacent to or within 300 feet of Russian Ridge Open Space Preserve and interested parties have been mailed written notices of this proposed Tentative Approval of the Use and Management Plan Amendment. All legal notice requirements of the Brown Act have been met.

As a reminder, the Board has reviewed as part of prior Board meetings six written communications requesting that the proposed trails be open to bicycles, as well as their accompanying responses.

CEQA COMPLIANCE

If the Board accepts the tentative Use and Management Plan Amendment as the project description for environmental review, District staff and the environmental consultants, LSA, will complete an Initial Study and Mitigated Negative Declaration (MND). Following a public review period, a subsequent Board meeting would be scheduled to consider all comment and

deliberate on certification of the MND and final approval of the Use and Management Plan amendment.

NEXT STEPS

Following the Board's tentative approval of the Use and Management Plan Amendment for Russian Ridge Open Space preserve, staff will file a Notice of Intent with the State Clearing House and distribute the environmental review document for Board and public review. Staff will also work with the District Legislative, Funding and Public Affairs (LFPAC) Committee to arrive at a recommendation for the full Board on the location and content of signs related to the commemorative site dedication.

At the end of the CEQA public review period, staff will return to the Board to present public comment and provide a final recommendation on CEQA certification of the environmental review document and final approval of the Use and Management Plan amendment.

Attachments:

- A: Project Area
- B. Proposed Commemorative Site Plan
- C: Proposed Staging Area Plan
- D. Proposed Trails Plan

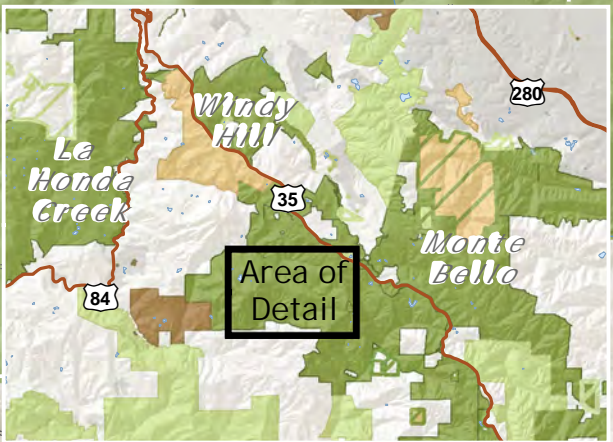
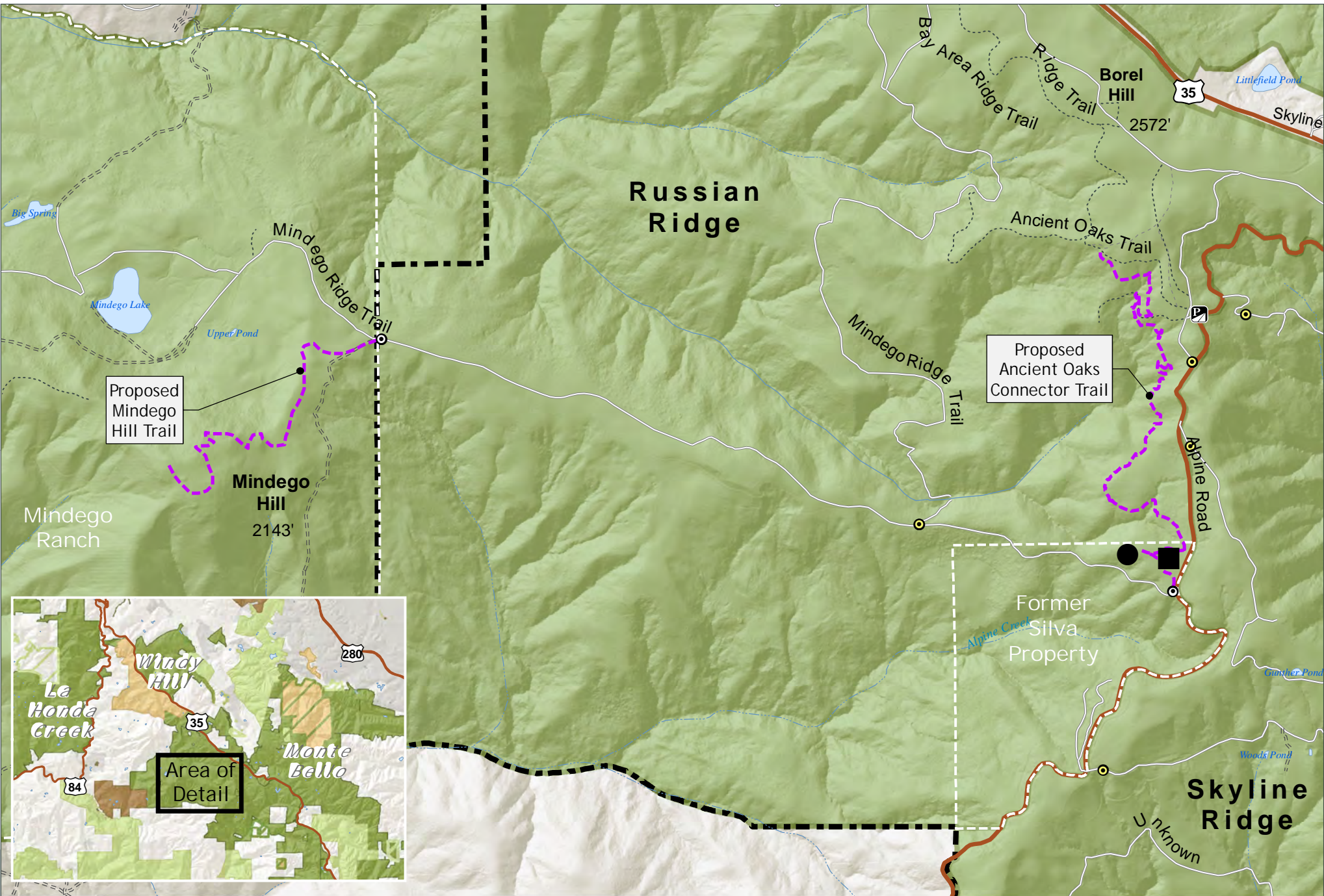
Prepared by:

Gina Coony, Project Manager
Lisa Bankosh, Open Space Planner II
Ana Ruiz, Planning Manager

Contact person:

Gina Coony, Project Manager

Created By: glauitsen Path: G:\Projects\Russian_Ridge\MindegoGatewayProject\Area_Att_A.mxd

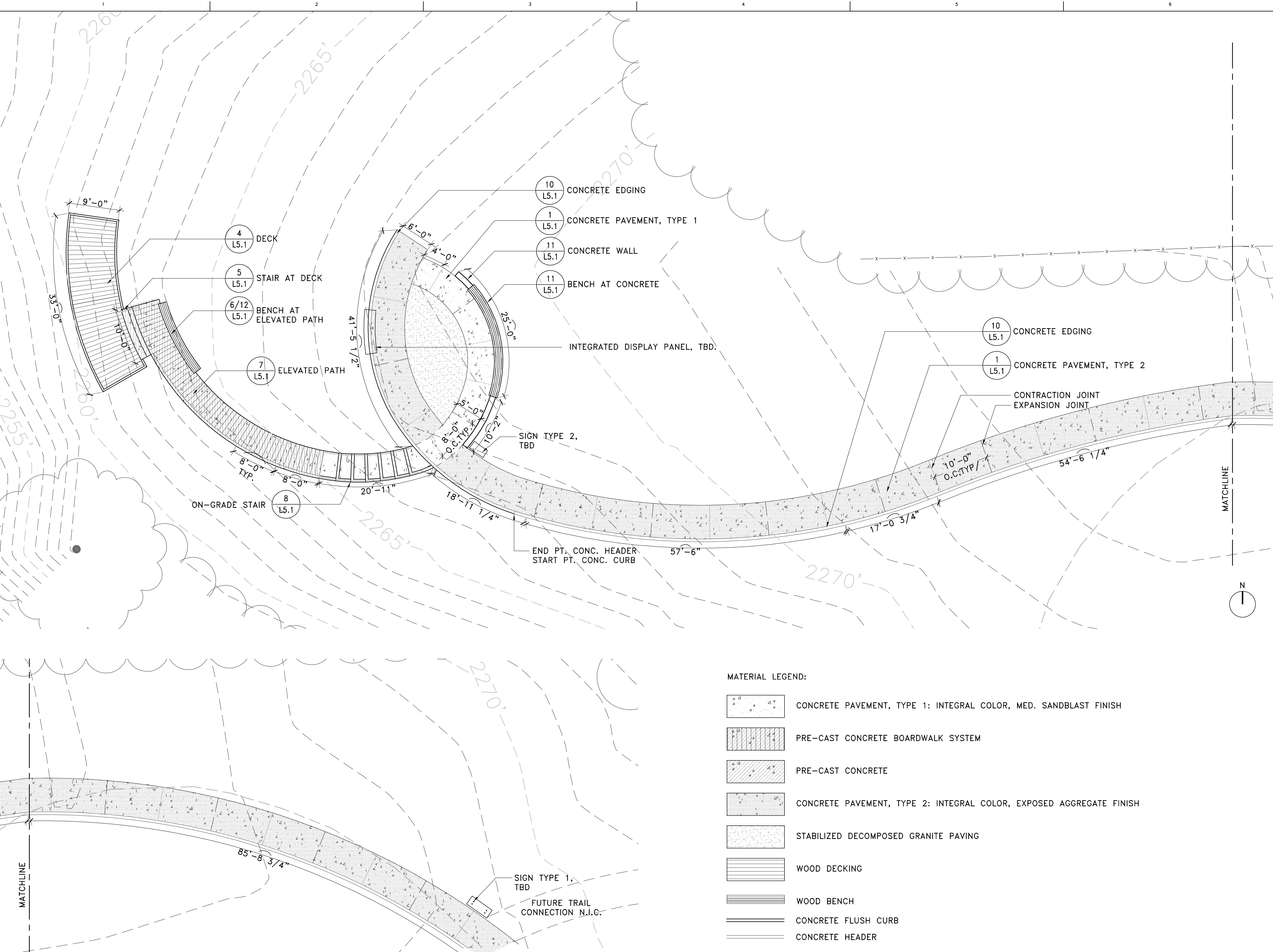


Attachment A: Mindego Gateway Project Area

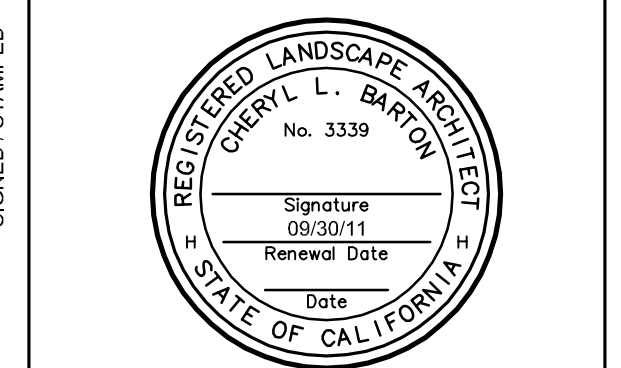
- Proposed Staging Area Location
- Proposed New Trail
- Coastal Protection Area
- Proposed Commemorative Site Location
- Roadside Parking
- Gate

Midpeninsula Regional
Open Space District
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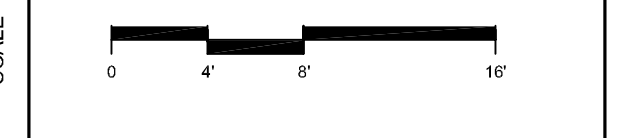


Attachment B: Proposed Commemorative Site Plan



SIGNED / STAMPED	
DATE	
DESCRIPTION	

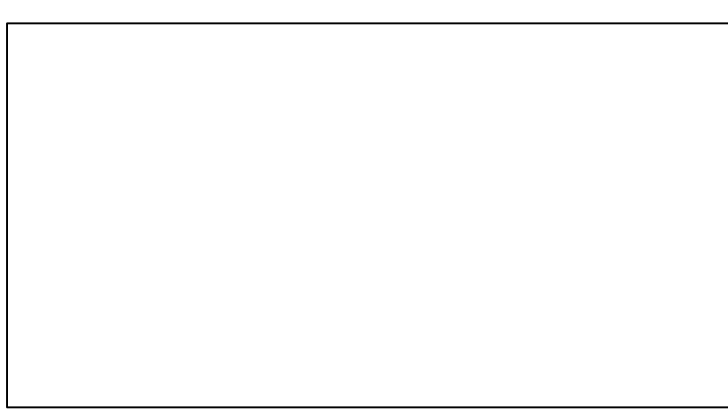
8/11/11	100% DESIGN DEVELOPMENT
DATE	DESCRIPTION



SCALE	
KEY PLAN	

DWG. TITLE: **LAYOUT PLAN**

SHEET NO. **L3.1**



SIGNED/STAMPED

PROJECT TITLE
**Staging Area at
 MINDEGO
 GATEWAY**
 RUSSIAN RIDGE
 OPEN SPACE PRESERVE
 Midpeninsula Regional
 Open Space District,
 San Mateo County,
 California

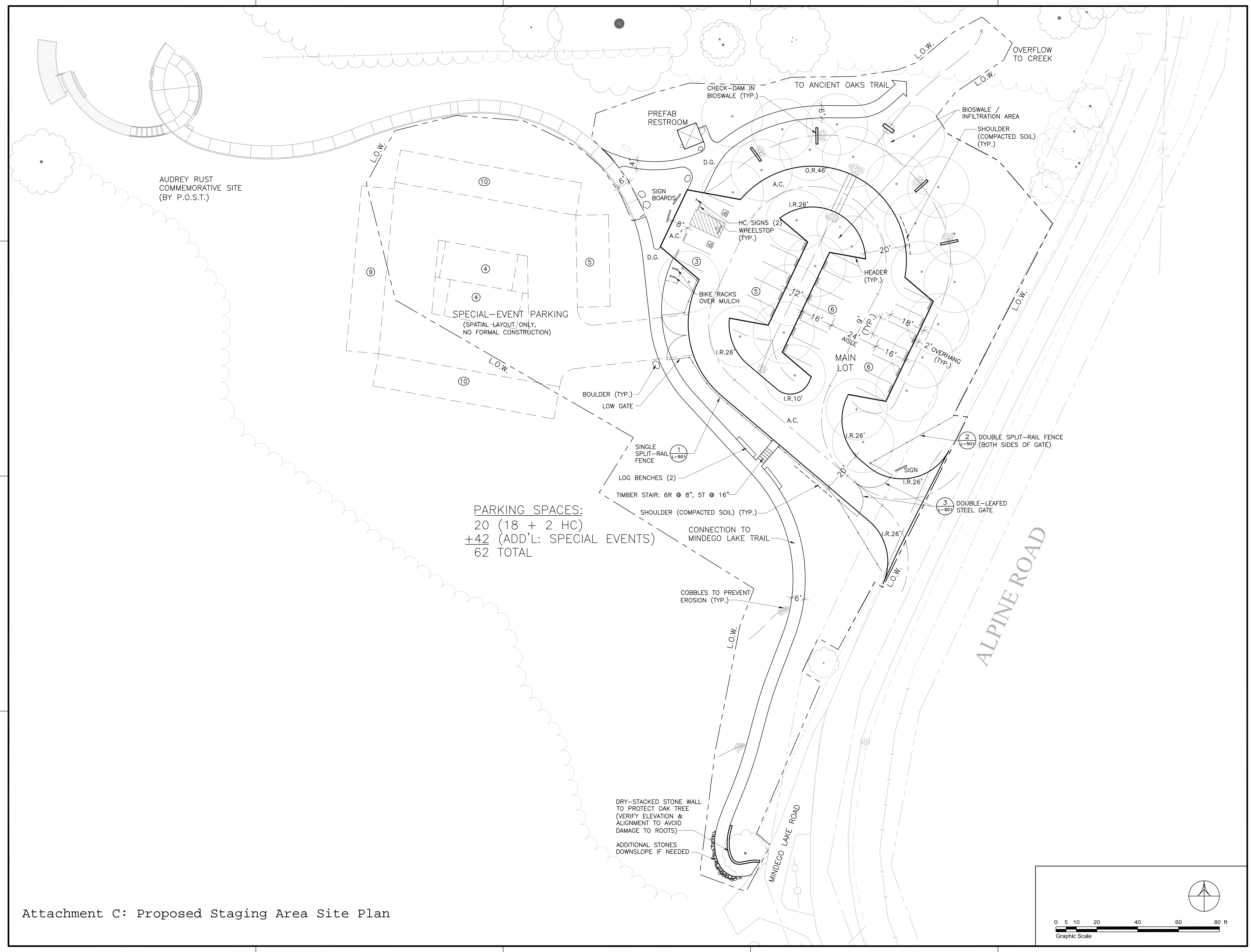
DATE	DESCRIPTION	REV
12 DEC 11	PLANNING SUBMITTAL	△
		△
		△
		△
		△
		△

SHEET TITLE
**SCHEMATIC
 SITE LAYOUT PLAN**

SCALE
 1" = 20'

DRAWN PROJECT NUMBER
 JNR / DKS 325

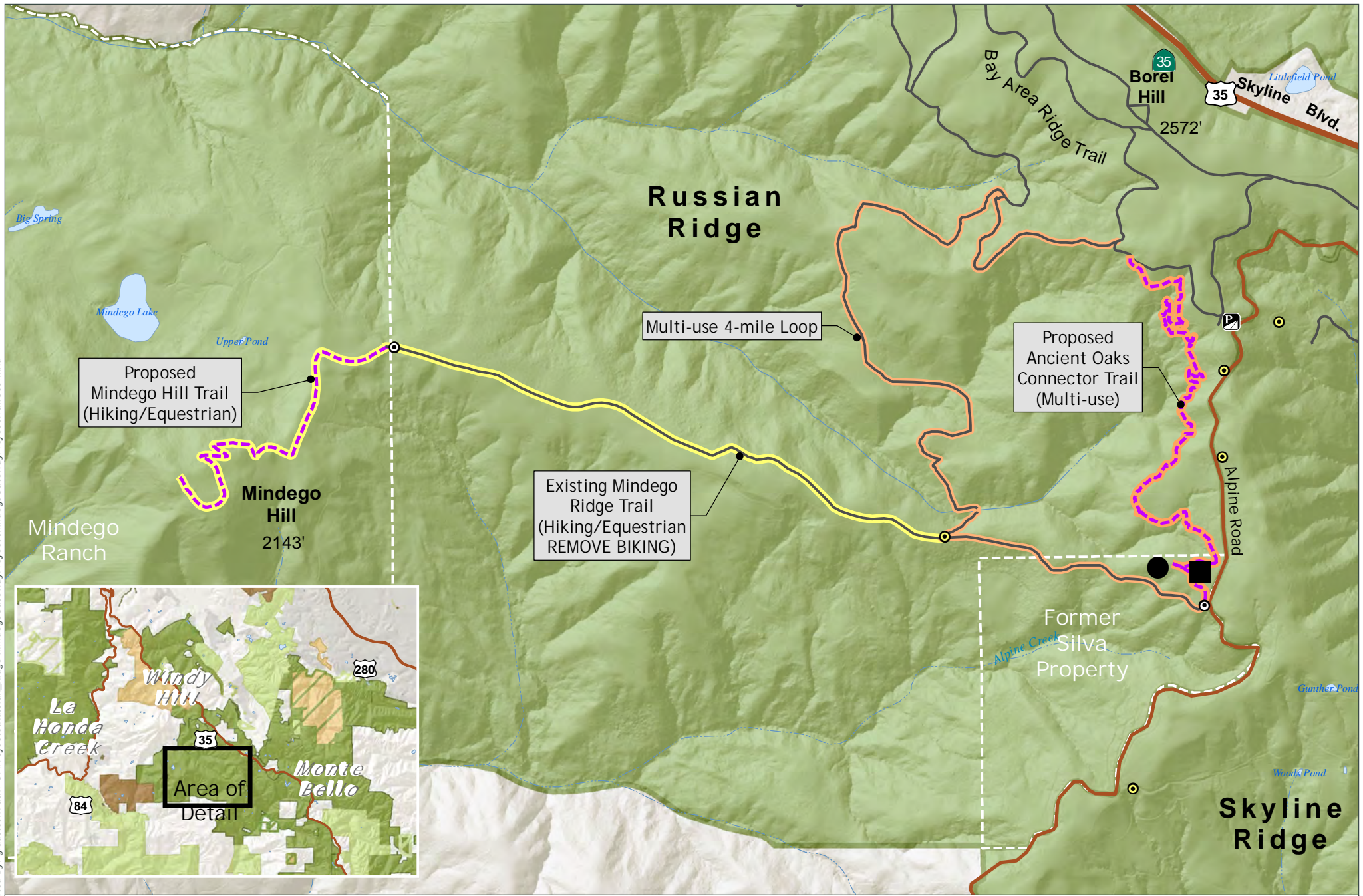
SHEET NUMBER
L-101
 4 OF 9



PARKING SPACES:
 20 (18 + 2 HC)
 +42 (ADD'L: SPECIAL EVENTS)
 62 TOTAL

Attachment C: Proposed Staging Area Site Plan

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Attachment D: Mindego Gateway Project Proposed Trails Plan

- Proposed New Trail
- Proposed- Hiking/Equestrian
- Existing/Proposed- Multi-use Trail Loop
- Existing Multi-use Public Trail
- Gate
- Proposed Commemorative Location
- Proposed Staging Area Location
- P Roadside Parking

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