



Midpeninsula Regional
Open Space District

R-25-68
Meeting 25-15
May 28, 2025

STUDY SESSION AGENDA ITEM 1

AGENDA ITEM

Hawthorns Historic Complex Feasibility Study Results and Options

GENERAL MANAGER'S RECOMMENDATION

Receive an informational presentation on (1) the results of the feasibility study conducted in support of the potential partnership opportunity to re-use the Hawthorns Historic Complex Lower Barn and (2) based on the results, the current limited next step options for the Hawthorns Historic Complex Lower Barn and other structures. The purpose of this meeting is to provide information, no formal Board action will take place.

SUMMARY

Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District (District) is planning for the future use and management of the Hawthorns Historic Complex (Historic Complex). The Board of Directors (Board) formed a Historic Complex Ad Hoc Committee during the September 13, 2023 Board meeting ([R-23-103](#)) to review and guide the high-level development of preliminary use and management ideas for the Historic Complex. In response to an unanticipated and potentially valuable partnership opportunity related specifically to the Lower Barn, one of the existing structures in the complex, the Ad Hoc Committee shifted their attention in early 2024 to explore the barn's rehabilitation and re-use as programming space that would serve people with disabilities and be made available to the broader public. At the January 22, 2025 regular meeting ([R-25-17](#)), the Board reviewed the feasibility work conducted to date on the Lower Barn and directed staff to continue pursuing the Lower Barn partnership opportunity and complete the high level feasibility study. At this May 28, 2025 regular meeting, the Board will review the final results of the feasibility study, understand the challenges and constraints encountered regarding any future re-use of the structures, and review options for next steps. Given the complexity of the re-use issues discovered during the feasibility study and implications of the current viable options, this item is being held first as a study session to bring the Board up to speed and provide an opportunity to process the information and ask questions. District staff will return to the Board at a later date with a follow-up item for a Board decision on next steps.

DISCUSSION

Hawthorns Area and Project Background

The 79-acre Hawthorns Area, which is located within the Town of Portola Valley (Town), was gifted to the District in 2011. The Hawthorns Property is overlain by a Conservation Easement

held and administered by Peninsula Open Space Trust (POST) that establishes use restrictions for the property. The property is currently closed to the public in accordance with a Preliminary Use and Management Plan (PUMP) (R-06-53) developed during the District's acquisition of the property. The PUMP remains effective until the plan is amended or a new comprehensive use and management plan for the area is prepared. The District is concurrently preparing the Hawthorns Area Plan, which will constitute a comprehensive use and management plan for the larger property, while simultaneously managing a longer-term planning process for re-use of the Historic Complex, both of which are further explained below.

The Hawthorns Historic Complex is an approximately 13-acre area located within the Hawthorns Area. The Historic Complex was once the site of a year-round family residence, summer retreat, and small-scale agricultural operation with structures that date back to the late 1800s. In 2013, the District retained Knapp Architects to prepare a [Historic Resource Study](#) for the Hawthorns Area, which concluded that the property is eligible for listing on the National Register of Historic Places as a historic district because it retains landscape features and structures that reflect the social, agricultural, and architectural history of San Francisco Peninsula estate property from the late 19th century. The Lower Barn is one of the four most significant primary buildings that contribute to the historic district, along with the Hawthorns Main House, the Garage (main portion, not the shed attachment), and the Cottage.

Hawthorns Area Plan

In 2021, the District initiated a multi-year planning process to develop the Hawthorns Area Plan in alignment with Board policy 4.01, *Open Space Use and Management Planning Process* and engaged members of the public and community, the Town of Portola Valley, District staff, and the Board. The Hawthorns Area Plan will serve as a comprehensive use and management plan, guiding natural and cultural resource, public access, and land management actions on the property. The Hawthorns Area Plan is currently in Phase 4, the Area Plan/Environmental Review phase, which involves the development of the Hawthorns Area Plan document as the project description to analyze under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA).

Historic Complex Planning

While the Hawthorns Area Plan will provide overarching guidance on natural and cultural resource, public access, and land management actions for the property, planning for the specific future use and management of the Historic Complex is not included in the Area Plan planning process and is a separate and parallel planning project that started in late 2023 (Attachment 1). The Board formed the Historic Complex Ad Hoc Committee (Ad Hoc Committee) during the September 13, 2023 regular meeting ([R-23-103](#)) to review and guide the development of high-level preliminary use and management ideas for the Historic Complex. Recognizing the Historic Complex is a unique resource within the Hawthorns Area, the Ad Hoc Committee recommended a separate vision statement and goals for the Historic Complex that complement the overall Hawthorns Area Vision Statement and Goals ([R-22-45](#)), and specifically guide the future use and management of the Historic Complex. The Historic Complex Vision Statement and Goals were approved by the Board on August 28, 2024 ([R-24-109](#)).

Board-approved Vision Statement for the Historic Complex

The vision for the Hawthorns Historic Complex is to implement a fiscally sustainable plan, including clean-up, rehabilitation, and long-term operations and maintenance, that allows the

site's cultural significance to be understood and safely enjoyed by the public, provides a location for the public to learn about environmental resources, and remains within the District's mission.

Board-approved Goals for the Historic Complex

1. Integrate with the Hawthorns Area Plan and its vision and goals.
2. Manage structures and landscape features in the Historic Complex in consideration of the federal guidelines for the treatment of historic properties and consistent with the Conservation Easement.
3. Balance the potential uses, improvements, and programs for the Historic Complex with the District's Mission, where future uses would achieve multiple goals.
4. Balance long-term financial and operational sustainability with potential benefits.
5. Through partnerships, connect with the community to advance the District's diversity, equity and inclusion goals.
6. Ensure safe access, guided by the District's Good Neighbor Policy, for the public to view and learn about the site's history and stories, and incorporate interpretive elements throughout the site.
7. Engage with Indigenous groups to explore opportunities for advancing the understanding of Indigenous history around the Hawthorns Area and Portola Valley.
8. Consider housing, either short-term or long-term, that supports the District's mission.
9. Incorporate the Historic Complex holistically within the overall Hawthorns Area Plan.

Historic Complex Partnership Opportunity

While exploring future use and management ideas for the Historic Complex, a potential partnership opportunity emerged for the Lower Barn with Jim and Patty White, long-time Portola Valley residents. The District was first introduced to the Whites in 2017 as interested and viable partners for the larger Historic Complex after an unsuccessful public solicitation to identify potential community partners through a 2014 Request for Letters of Interest (RLOI) process. The Whites were previously interested in re-use of the Hawthorns main house as a residential facility for adults with intellectual or developmental delays. Due to challenges in adapting the structure, the Whites shifted their residential project (now known as Willow Commons) to a private property located across the road from the Hawthorns Area. More recently, the Whites have been exploring programming space options for Willow Common residents and other adults with developmental disabilities or delays. The Whites' interest in re-using the Lower Barn as programming space arose given its proximity to Willow Commons and its location within an open space setting.

As directed by the Board and with the Ad Hoc Committee's guidance, the District accelerated the exploration of the partnership and potential rehabilitation and re-use of the Lower Barn as a programmed community space. The Lower Barn is a large 4,500 square feet, one-story structure with a gabled roof and vertical board-and-batten siding. Programming would entail use of the barn as a community studio space for creative art projects inspired by the natural surroundings that services people with developmental disabilities or delays, including Willow Common residents, and include access to the space and programs for the larger public.

Preliminary Feasibility Study Findings

To inform the viability of rehabilitation and re-use of the Lower Barn, a focused, high-level feasibility study was conducted in 2024 and preliminary results were presented to the Board on January 22, 2025 ([R-25-17](#)). The feasibility study determined a Conditional Use Permit would be

needed from the Town of Portola Valley and it also assessed the constructability of repairs and improvements to the Lower Barn. Based on these early findings, the Board directed staff to pursue a partnership agreement for rehabilitating and programming the Lower Barn and to bring the proposed terms and conditions of a partnership agreement to the Board at a later meeting for consideration of approval. As part of this effort, staff continued working with the Whites on an in-depth exploration of the specific regulatory requirements, and with POST to confirm alignment with the Conservation Easement.

Final Feasibility Study Conclusions and Zoning/Permitting/Conservation Easement Challenges

Following the January 22, 2025 regular meeting, staff analyzed in greater detail the Town and Woodside Fire Protection District (WFPD) regulations related to permitted uses, access and infrastructure. This analysis was conducted to determine a permitting approach and the specific site improvements required for the proposed re-use of the Lower Barn as a recreational facility for adults with developmental disabilities. Staff also consulted POST on the compatibility of the proposed use and required improvements with the allowances and restrictions under the Conservation Easement.

The Hawthorns property has a zoning designation of Residential Estate (R-E), which requires a Conditional Use Permit for the proposed use as a recreational facility for adults with developmental disabilities. In order to meet the conditions of a Conditional Use Permit, vehicular and supplemental emergency access requires significant upgrades to the dirt road from Alpine Road to the Historic Complex. After reviewing the required access improvements from Alpine Road and through the property, POST indicated to District staff that the level of anticipated road improvements to fulfill Town and WFPD code requirements would impair the conservation values of the property identified in the Conservation Easement and were therefore incompatible.

District staff next analyzed the feasibility of an amendment to either the Town's General Plan or a zoning amendment to the R-E Zoning District to allow for programming use without the need for a Conditional Use Permit. Staff determined that a General Plan or Zoning amendment process would be substantially lengthy and rely on the willingness and availability of the Town, which is currently experiencing staff turnover and limited resources. The effort would also likely generate significant public interest given the community's desire to retain the rural character of the Town and minimize changes that may affect the scenic Alpine Road corridor, including expanding the footprint and visibility of existing driveways and interior roadways, and concerns that such an amendment may promote other use and physical changes to the land that may affect rural character, traffic, noise, etc.

Conclusion

The feasibility study determined that re-use options are highly limited for the Lower Barn (or any other structure) because public programming uses are prohibited by current zoning or trigger numerous Town zoning and WFPD code requirements that are prohibited under the Conservation Easement. This problematic obstacle in turn makes it difficult to form financially viable partnerships for their re-use, even when the re-use provides a tangible public benefit. Improvements to the buildings, even with no public programming use, will be expensive and require ongoing maintenance costs, so the lack of partnership opportunities to help offset costs further limits District options.

Given the re-use limitations of the buildings, attainment of many of the Historic Complex goals is infeasible or greatly hindered. The District therefore is left with few remaining options (Table 1) for the Historic Complex buildings. Table 1 outlines those options along with rough costs and additional considerations. The final option listed in the table below is a last resort effort that can be considered to form an Ad Hoc Committee of three Board members. The Ad Hoc Committee would work with Town and WFPD elected officials and staff to brainstorm creative solutions related to Town/WFPD code and zoning requirements that reduce the scale and scope of site improvement conditions to remain compliant with the Conservation Easement and permit beneficial public programming uses to occur at the site.

Table 1. Historic Complex Use Options Under Current Zoning and Code Conditions

Opt #	Use	*Initial Structure Costs (Preliminary Estimate)	Annual Operations and Maintenance Costs	Notes
1	Reuse Main House as a single-family residence; secure and fence remaining three primary structures in current state	\$5,200,000	\$30,000	Limited or no partnership opportunities for re-use of the main house as a single-family residence due to high costs; challenging to rent due to market rental rate for a 10,000 s.f. home Remaining structures would likely further deteriorate over time, needing eventual removal
2	Reuse Garage (560 s.f.) as a single-family residence; secure and fence remaining three primary structures in current state	\$570,000	\$10,000	Limited or no partnership opportunities for re-use of the Garage as a single-family residence due to no public programming and limited space for use Remaining structures would likely further deteriorate over time, needing eventual removal.
3	Stabilize, mothball and secure all four primary buildings; provide exterior interpretation (e.g. Alma Cultural Landscape) with no interior entry	\$1,600,000	\$55,000	Limited or no partnership opportunities Requires physical repairs prior to mothballing (e.g. roof replacement, structural repairs, ventilation) and ongoing pest management, monitoring, security, and other maintenance costs (assumes mothballing per Secretary of the Interior standards)
4	Secure and fence all four primary buildings in current state	N/A	Unknown	Structures would likely further deteriorate over time, needing eventual removal

5	Demolition	\$550,000	N/A	Requires development of an EIR and a Statement of Overriding Considerations. Requires demolition permit.
6	Transfer ownership of the Historic Complex area	\$50-\$75,000**	N/A	Requires a willing recipient that is a governmental agency or non-profit entity. Re-use limitations remain with the property and pose a challenge in identifying a willing recipient.
7	Form an Ad Hoc Committee to work directly with Town/WFPD elected officials and staff to explore Town and WFPD actions that can facilitate public programming and be consistent with the Conservation Easement	N/A	N/A	No direct costs anticipated. Requires willingness from Town/WFPD elected officials and staff to brainstorm potential creative solutions that can be presented in a public setting for consideration of approval.

*Costs do not include the costs to install and manage limited public access trails to view buildings and site, develop interpretive elements, conduct additional site security measures, permanent security fence, continual defensible space, or design or CEQA review costs

**Costs for property survey

Given the complexity of the re-use issues discovered for the Hawthorns Historic Complex structures and implications of the current viable options listed above, this item is being held first as a study session to bring the Board up to speed and provide an opportunity to process the information and ask questions. District staff will return to the Board at a later date with a follow-up item for a Board decision on next steps.

FISCAL IMPACT

The recommended action has no immediate fiscal impact.

PRIOR BOARD AND COMMITTEE REVIEW

- March 23, 2022: Board reviewed and approved the Hawthorns Area vision and goals ([R-22-45](#), [meeting minutes](#))
- September 13, 2023: Board formed an Ad Hoc Committee to explore ideas for the future use and management of the Historic Complex ([R-23-103](#), [meeting minutes](#))
- April 10, 2024: FYI to the Board regarding a partnership opportunity for the Lower Barn ([April 10, 2024](#), [meeting minutes](#))
- July 10, 2024: Board reviewed and commented on the Vision and Goals for the Hawthorns Historic Complex ([R-24-86](#), [meeting minutes](#))

- July 10, 2024: Board reviewed and approved the Interim Stabilization and Debris Removal Plan for the Historic Complex ([R-24-87](#), [meeting minutes](#))
- August 28, 2024: Board approved the Hawthorns Historic Complex Vision and Goals ([R-24-109](#), [meeting minutes](#))
- October 9, 2024: Board received an informational presentation on the Hawthorns Historic Complex Lower Barn Partnership feasibility work ([R-24-122](#), [meeting minutes](#))
- January 22, 2025: Board reviewed the feasibility work conducted to date on the Lower Barn and directed staff to pursue the Lower Barn partnership opportunity ([R-25-17](#), [meeting minutes](#))

PUBLIC NOTICE

Public notice was provided as required by the Brown Act.

CEQA COMPLIANCE

This item is not a project subject to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). Future decisions related to the use and management of the Historic Complex may be subject to environmental review; this environmental analysis would be completed prior to the Board's consideration of a Use and Management Plan amendment and implementation.

NEXT STEPS

Following this study session, staff will return to the Board at a subsequent meeting for Board direction on one of the above options.

Other next steps for projects occurring on the Hawthorns Area Property

Development of the Hawthorns Area Plan continues as a separate project that is proceeding concurrently for the Board's future consideration.

On July 10, 2024, the Board approved an Interim Stabilization and Debris Removal Plan to provide temporary stabilization for structures retaining historic integrity and to remove secondary structures that no longer retain historical integrity ([R-24-87](#)). This work will be implemented in Spring-Fall 2025.

Attachment(s)

1. Hawthorns Area Planning Projects Map
2. Hawthorns Area Aerial Map

Responsible Department Head:

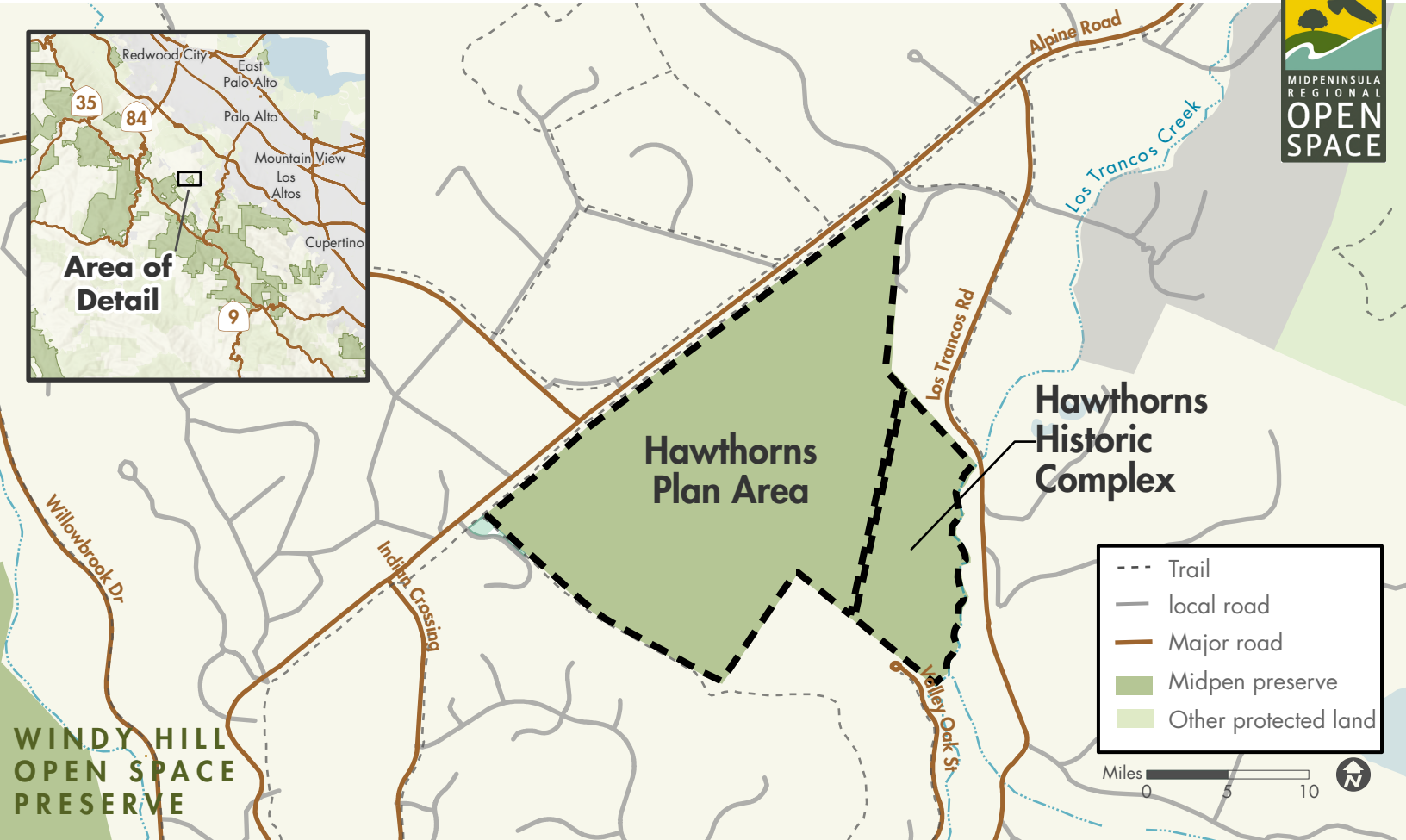
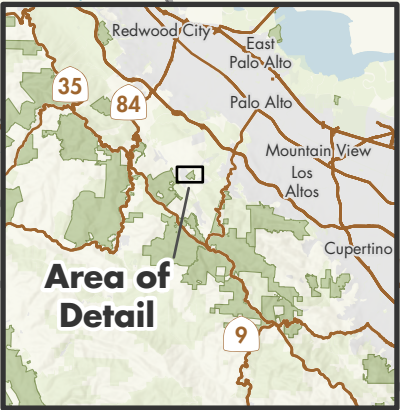
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ATTACHMENT 2

Path: G:\Projects\Windy_Hill\Hawthorns\Hawthorns_MapSeries_MapSeries_MapSeries.aprx
Created By: eplumart



Hawthorns Area

- Hawthorns Area
- Paved road
- Building
- Unpaved seasonal road
- Historic complex

Midpeninsula Regional
Open Space District
(Midpen)
5/2/2025



While the District strives to use the best available digital data, these data do not represent a legal survey and are merely a graphic illustration of geographic features.