



R-21-36
Meeting 21-09
March 10, 2021

AGENDA ITEM 3

AGENDA ITEM

Best Practices from the La Honda Public Access Working Group Pilot

GENERAL MANAGER’S RECOMMENDATIONS *den*

Receive an overview of best practices learned from the La Honda Public Access Working Group pilot. No action required.

SUMMARY

This informational presentation provides an overview of the overarching best practices learned from the La Honda Public Access Working Group (PAWG), the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District’s (District) first working group comprised of members of the public and Board of Directors (Board) representatives. The project team will review key highlights of what worked well and what could be improved based on staff observations and PAWG feedback, with the goal of applying these best practices to future similar public engagement efforts.

BACKGROUND

At the June 12, 2018 special meeting on the Red Barn Public Access Site Plan (R-18-64), the Board directed the General Manager to put the project on hold to evaluate alternative parking options and establish a citizens advisory committee. The Board approved the group’s composition on April 9, 2019 (R-19-39) and officially formed the PAWG on June 26, 2019 (R-19-85) with the following members.

Member Type	Member
Board Directors (non-voting)	Larry Hassett, Ward 6 Curt Riffle, Ward 4
La Honda area representatives	Ari Delay Karl Lusebrink Kathleen Moazed
Ward 6 stakeholders	Lou Bordi Barbara Hooper
Wards 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, & 7 stakeholders	Ward 1: Melany Moore Ward 2: Art Heinrich Ward 3: Willie Wool Ward 4: Sandy Sommer Ward 5: Andie Reed Ward 7: Denise Philips

The PAWG convened seven working group meetings over a period of eight months and evaluated five site locations in the middle and southern areas of La Honda Creek Open Space Preserve (Preserve) that could best provide public access to the central closed area of the Preserve and achieve the project goals and objectives. At the end of their work, the PAWG concluded that multiple locations packaged together as a suite of potential project sites would best achieve the project goals and objectives. Thus, the PAWG provided a recommendation with a “suite” or combination of project site options that forms a set of uses, amenities, and parking and trailhead access facilities distributed across multiple locations. On July 28, 2020, the Planning and Natural Resources Committee unanimously forwarded the PAWG’s recommendations to the full Board (R-20-81) with the Board approving the recommendations at the October 21, 2020 meeting (R-20-115).

DISCUSSION

The PAWG was the District’s first public access working group in recent memory comprised of members of the public and Board directors, and as such, was viewed as a pilot for future similar community and stakeholder engagement processes. The project team developed processes and procedures, which can be used for other projects, and noted areas of improvements as the process unfolded. Key observations of the pilot have been categorized in the following sections:

1. Working Group Formation
2. Working Group Management
3. Process Management
4. Public Involvement

Working Group Formation

Balanced Perspectives

The PAWG was formed to incorporate the interests and concerns of both the local community and the broader population who reside within District boundaries. More specifically, the PAWG held three seats that were specifically filled by interested Town of La Honda/local community residents plus two seats filled by residents representing the ward where the project is located (who were also part of the local community) and one seat each filled by residents representing the other six wards. The PAWG also includes two Board liaisons who were non-voting members. Each voting PAWG member was expected to independently weigh the interest of the community or ward he or she represented and bring an individual and unique perspective to the larger group. This balance of perspectives provided beneficial insights from a wide variety of important perspectives – the PAWG demonstrated that this is a useful and insightful approach that can be successfully replicated for future working groups. As part of the nomination process of ward representatives, the Board took into consideration the backgrounds of each nominee to help establish a ward representative cohort that represented the different visitor user groups who frequent District preserves (e.g. hikers, equestrians, bicyclists, and dog walkers) to incorporate various user experiences and perspectives as part of the PAWG. The PAWG was ultimately comprised of individuals with a wide variety of backgrounds and a common interest in helping the District achieve its goal of providing public access to the closed central area of La Honda Creek Open Space Preserve.

Cultivating Citizen Participation

In order to be able to continue pursuing broad perspectives for future working groups, the District will likely need to identify, engage, and cultivate a large cohort of ward and community representatives who are available and interested in working with the District on similar efforts. There may also need to be District support and training for these representatives on how to effectively engage and communicate with the community they represent to share information and gain feedback about the project.

Board Participation

PAWG members found the participation of the two Board liaisons members very valuable by bringing the perspective of the Board into the group discussion and providing insight into the Board decision making process. One PAWG comment was that the group might have benefitted from the Board liaisons providing guidance earlier in the process as to the type of recommendations the Board was expecting from the PAWG. The Board liaisons also advised that better clarity and orientation on their roles and expected level of participation would be beneficial.

Importance of the Facilitator Role

Retaining an outside facilitator was deemed invaluable by both the project team and PAWG. Having a neutral third-party facilitator can be beneficial and critical on complex, sensitive, and high-profile projects that garner strong community interest. The facilitator served as a neutral third party who was able to help guide the discussion and flow of the meetings and act as a sounding board for individual members. Selecting a facilitator with well-developed soft skills and emotional intelligence promotes a conducive environment for relationship building and create a safe space for a working group to effectively discuss the project. The project team benefited from the facilitator's expertise and outside perspective to develop the format and establish the goals of each meeting. The facilitator often drew from past facilitation and engagement experience to improve the process and provide an open and inclusive environment for the group to share ideas and opinions. It was key that the facilitator attend all meetings and site visits to develop a deeper and trusting relationship with the group members, community, project, and environs. For less complex projects, staff with facilitation training can also effectively serve in the role of facilitator.

Setting Goals and Ground Rules from the Start

One of the critical first steps in developing the PAWG was establishing a set of clear goals, ground rules and operating procedures to guide the group's work. These were shared with the PAWG at their first meeting and were shared and referred to often. The goals and rules were also posted at the meetings for the benefit of the PAWG and audience members. The group appreciated that the expectations and goals were clearly expressed by the project team.

Communicating Workload and Time Commitment

Given that attendance and homework were key components of the working group's success, it is recommended that during future recruitment processes, the District share the expected amount of time and work anticipated from each member to help candidates understand the level of commitment needed and for what duration. The PAWG pilot taught District staff how much meeting documentation and homework are needed for a working group to understand and work through a project and for the project team to respond to questions and share the group's work with the public.

Working Group Management

Setting Aside Time for “Getting to know you” Phase

For future working groups, the project team received feedback that members would benefit from more time spent on the early “getting to know you” phase of the process. The first meeting can be held at the District’s office to give the group a broad orientation of the goals, ground rules, and background information. Also, taking people out on site quickly thereafter will provide the group a less formal environment to get to know their fellow group members, familiarize with the project and site, and feel energized about starting their work.

Group Leadership

The PAWG was asked to elect a Chair and Vice-Chair to provide leadership for the group and work with the staff project team on reviewing meeting logistics, confirming discussion topics, and establishing the meeting format. The staff project team realized that this process occurred too early before members had time to get to know one another. The selection would ideally be held after a couple of orientation meetings, one of those being a site visit. Before the leadership positions are elected by the group, it is also important that the staff project team clearly explain the time commitment needed from the roles, the additional number of separate meetings requiring Chair and Vice-Chair attendance, and the importance of these preparatory meetings in achieving smoothly executed and productive working group meetings. It is also beneficial for each candidate to be given the opportunity to share his or her vision, leadership style, and background experience for the role prior to the working group taking their election votes.

Instead of a Chair and Vice-Chair, future working groups could consider Co-Chairs, one a local community representative and the other a ward representative, who can share the responsibility of chairing meetings to balance leadership responsibilities and perspectives and to alleviate the burden on one person. Those elected for these positions would benefit from receiving a training session on meeting management, the Brown Act, and other key topics. In addition, these positions can benefit from receiving detailed speaking points or a script for administering meeting procedures, from opening the meeting to conducting the public comment periods and closing the meeting. Providing adequate support and training of the chair positions is a necessary step to avoid confusion and to ensure a smooth meeting process.

Sufficient Opportunity to Establish Baseline Background

Working group members will come from throughout the District and will have varying degrees of familiarity with the project area and with District planning and engagement processes. The group will be eager to begin work immediately, but to ensure all members have the same level of knowledge of the project and the District, sufficient orientation time and space for the staff project team to share and the working group to absorb background information are necessary before the group begins earnest discussions. This allows members not as familiar with the area and District processes to observe site conditions during land tours and form informed individual opinions before the group begins to share ideas and concerns and develop options and solutions.

Approaches for Managing Difficult Conversations

Throughout the process, working group members can find themselves focused on a particular issue or opinion and be less receptive to differing ideas. Meeting management by a trained facilitator is a critical component to ensuring all group members have an opportunity to be heard and understood by the group in a productive and professional manner. In addition, continual reminders, and references back to the goals and ground rules, are effective to overcoming these

difficult conversations. At times it may be appropriate for the Chair/Co-Chairs or even other members to assist in advancing the conversation and hearing other perspectives.

Process Management

Clear Yet Flexible Schedule

When developing a tentative schedule for a working group, it was critical to build a framework with enough flexibility in the timeline, specifically near the end of the process, when the group is working towards its final recommendations. The project team should expect that the group may need additional meetings to discuss and formulate their recommendations. The timeline should also anticipate meetings needed to respond to Board or Committee questions and requests for additional information.

Sufficient Resources for Meeting Support and Management

To build and maintain momentum, the working group process relies on a fast-paced schedule and in-depth meeting and document preparation that require a significant amount of staff time and support. Administering a Brown Act process adds another layer of logistics to meeting preparation, documentation, and notification efforts. Sufficient staff resources and time need to be incorporated into future working group efforts to ensure a fully supported, effective, and transparent public process.

PAWG meetings were held four weeks apart, allowing the group to meet once a month. This pace was fast enough for the group to maintain its momentum but spaced out adequately to give the staff project team time to prepare for the next meeting. Regular meetings lasted at least three hours and site tours required at least four hours. Three or four hours were observed to be the maximum that the group could effectively participate, and this time commitment should be factored into future working group processes.

Each PAWG meeting was supported by four preparation meetings, including three briefing meetings beforehand and one debrief meeting afterwards. The briefing meetings focused on developing meeting agendas, workflows, and materials for the upcoming working group meeting. Briefing meetings involved a combination of the staff project team, meeting facilitator, and General Manager's office, and the debriefing meetings included the Chair, Vice Chair and Board liaisons. The debriefing meeting following the PAWG meeting provided a forum for the Chair, Vice Chair, and Board liaisons to share with the project team their thoughts on the meeting outcomes, areas of improvement, and next steps and upcoming deliverables. The level of effort and amount of meeting preparation are critical to any future working group effort to ensure that meetings result in a thoughtful, thorough, and efficient use of members' time.

Focusing on Project Documentation that Informs Decisions

PAWG members appreciated that they gained a thorough understanding of the project through the copious documentation provided, but they observed that there is a time-consuming volume of material to read. Not all of the material requested was useful for the whole group and towards the end of the PAWG process, the project team asked the group to discuss and confirm what information being requested was essential for members to make informed decisions. This allowed the project team to focus their efforts on obtaining the most relevant material the group needed to do their work.

Allocation of Staff Capacity

The amount of careful planning, meeting preparation and documentation developed for this process required two dedicated staff on the project team. In addition to staff time from the two project team members, additional staff support and time are needed to support the site tours for tasks such as driving, narrating, taking notes, and setting up light refreshments and the room for the meetings. PAWG members regularly shared their appreciation of the General Manager's Office's time and participation, which reinforced the process' importance and priority to the District. Leadership from the General Manager's Office will provide critical guidance and insight in future working group efforts.

Public Involvement

Public Engagement

PAWG meetings alternated between the La Honda location and the District headquarters to provide opportunities for members of the public to attend whether residing nearby or far from the study area. This will be key for future working group efforts, particularly for those associated with more remote areas of the District's jurisdiction.

To facilitate public engagement, working group meetings can include two opportunities for public comments in the meeting agenda: one at the beginning of the meeting to comment on items from the last meeting or items not on the agenda and another towards the end of the meeting to comment on items that are agendaized for or discussed during that meeting. PAWG members suggested the two-public-comment-period format after observing audience attrition during their three-hour meetings. This arrangement allowed members of the public to share their comments early if they needed to leave before the end of the meetings.

Broad Notification

Given the level of prior interest in the project and its association with Highway 84, the PAWG project team expanded the notification area beyond the Preserve boundary and included residents along the 15-mile stretch of Highway 84 between Highways 1 and 35. Also notified were people signed up on the District's La Honda Creek Preserve interested parties list. The project team also posted meeting notifications locally at the La Honda Post Office and General Store to reach community members, and in the trailhead signboards of preserves along Highway 35 to reach other District visitors. PAWG and community members expressed their appreciation of the broad notification efforts. For future working group efforts, attention to engagement efforts and notification areas is vital to ensure that a large audience is reached. Large mailings require the services of a mail house. In an effort to be environmentally sustainable and to streamline notification processes, initial notifications can utilize hard copy postcard mailers, which then request people to transition to email notifications.

Final Thoughts

The PAWG pilot has been praised as a successful process, with a highly engaged and committed group who, over the course of almost a year, produced a list of site recommendations that can move forward to the feasibility study stage of the La Honda Creek public access project. The best practices learned from this pilot will serve future working groups like the PAWG. Though shown to be successful, an engagement process involving a working group requires the commitment and allocation of significant staff time and resources to administer, from recruiting the PAWG members to hosting meetings and site tours, and is well suited for complex, high

profile projects or efforts, such as the one completed by the PAWG. Given the amount of resources required for this level of engagement, the District may elect to reserve the working group stakeholder process for highly complex planning processes that are of strong interest to a wide spectrum of District residents. Other planning processes may benefit from borrowing some of the elements of the PAWG process and appropriately scaling the effort.

FISCAL IMPACT

None.

BOARD COMMITTEE REVIEW

Planning and Natural Resources Committee met on [July 28, 2020 \(meeting minutes\)](#) and forwarded the PAWG recommendations to the full Board on [October 21, 2020 \(meeting minutes\)](#). At the October meeting, the Board members expressed interest in what best practices the project team learned through this pilot process.

PUBLIC NOTICE

Public notice was provided as required by the Brown Act. Additional notice was provided to parties interested in the La Honda Creek Preserve interested parties email list. Notifications were posted at the Preserve's three trailheads at the Event Center, Sears Ranch, and Allen Road as well as the La Honda Post Office and General Store.

CEQA COMPLIANCE

This item is not a project subject to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA).

NEXT STEPS

District staff will build upon the best practices developed from this working group process and adapt them for future working groups.

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