

Major Accomplishments Report

JULY 1, 2022-JUNE 30, 2023





MISSION The mission of the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District is to acquire and preserve a regional greenbelt of open space land in perpetuity, protect and restore the natural environment, and provide opportunities for ecologically sensitive public enjoyment and education.

COASTSIDE MISSION To acquire and preserve in perpetuity open space land and agricultural land of regional significance, protect and restore the natural environment, preserve rural character, encourage viable agricultural use of land resources, and provide opportunities for ecologically sensitive public enjoyment and education.





Fiscal Year 2022-23 Major Accomplishments

MIDPENINSULA REGIONAL OPEN SPACE DISTRICT

This report highlights major accomplishments in Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District's (Midpen's) priority projects and programs during Fiscal Year 2022-2023 (FY23), which spans from July 1, 2022 to June 30, 2023. Accomplishments are organized by program, preserve (when applicable) then project. Midpen's four programs are described below:



Land Acquisition and Preservation: Midpen seeks to purchase or otherwise acquire interest in the maximum feasible area of strategic open space land within the District, including baylands, foothills and ridgelines, and link its open space lands with federal, state, county and city parklands and watershed lands.



Natural Resource Protection and Restoration: Midpen protects and restores the natural diversity and integrity of its resources for their value to the environment and the public.



Public Access, Education and Outreach: Midpen provides public access to the open space lands for low-intensity recreational uses to everyone, regardless of physical abilities or economic status.



Assets and Organizational Support: Midpen employs a highly capable and professional staff and provides them with the facilities and resources needed to run an efficient and responsible organization on behalf of the public.

This report also highlights accomplishments that support Midpen's areas of interest. To improve readability, icons are included next to pertinent accomplishments. Areas of interest are described below:



Agriculture: Supporting agriculture and sustaining conservation grazing programs on Midpen lands furthers both the mission and Board-adopted Strategic Goals and Objectives (Goal 1, Objective 4 and Goal 2, Objective 5).



Diversity, Equity and Inclusion: Connecting diverse communities to their public open space preserves through the support of regional partnerships and expanded outreach to youth and underserved communities (Goal 3, Objectives 2, 3, and 4).



Wildland Fire Resiliency: Working with local fire agencies and surrounding communities to enhance Midpen's wildland fire preparedness and responsiveness (Goal 2, Objective 4).



Land Acquisition and Preservation











CLOVERDALE RANCH PRESERVE

In the early summer of 2023, Midpen closed escrow on the purchase of approximately 5,100-acres of the Cloverdale Ranch property located south of Pescadero from our nonprofit partner Peninsula Open Space Trust (POST), creating Midpen's 27th open space preserve. This property is comprised of coastal terraces near the ocean shore that rise eastward toward the upper forested slopes of the Santa Cruz mountains.

This land includes large tracts of biologically rich coastal grassland and coastal scrub habitats and an abundance of water sources that support many rare, grassland-dependent and aquatic species. Like much of the San Mateo County Coast, Cloverdale has a rich agricultural heritage, which continues today. The public-private partnership between Midpen and POST is helping preserve the Coastside's ranching and farming heritage, and a source of locally grown food for the surrounding communities.

Approximately 2,700-acres of the recently purchased uplands area is actively grazed and will be incorporated into Midpen's conservation grazing program.

The existing Wilbur's Watch Trail remains open to the public, traversing coastal grasslands from Highway 1 to a lookout point for viewing the coastline and Pigeon Point Lighthouse. The public process to create new trails at Cloverdale Ranch Open Space Preserve will take time to balance environmental protection, agriculture and community needs. In the interim, Midpen is providing limited access via guided walks and other programming through our guided activities program.

Midpen is exploring the possibility of purchasing a remaining 1,200-acre portion of the property.





PURISIMA CREEK REDWOODS PRESERVE

As an addition to Purisima Creek Redwoods Open Space Preserve, Midpen purchased POST's remaining undivided 33% interest in the 611-acre South Cowell Property, bringing Midpen's undivided ownership interest to 87%. The purchase improves management and access to surrounding Midpen lands, preserves grazing lands, protects the Lobitos Creek watershed and offers compatible trail use opportunities for planning the Purisima-to-the-Sea Trail.

SIERRA AZUL PRESERVE

Within the upper Los Gatos Creek watershed, Midpen purchased a 102-acre property from San Jose Water Company. This purchase fills an inholding, connects protected open space and wildlife corridors, and may provide future public access opportunities to the Cathedral Oaks portion of Sierra Azul Open Space Preserve.



Natural Resource Protection and Restoration

SIERRA AZUL PRESERVE

Many creatures of primary importance for biodiversity conservation and management call Sierra Azul Open Space Preserve home.



The elusive, nearly extinct Santa Cruz kangaroo rat (*Dipodomys venustus venustus*, top left) is a sandy soil dweller whose habitat is threatened by woody plant encroachment. Habitat assessments, rare plant surveys, live-trapping and genetic sampling were conducted during FY23 to inform the development of a habitat and population management plan for the rare species. The plan will also identify site-specific enhancements to increase the resilience of the species to support population health on Midpen lands.



The California newt (*Taricha torosa*, center left), one of our most charismatic local salamanders, is known for its sometimes treacherous mass migrations to and from bodies of water to reproduce. One such movement corridor lies across Alma Bridge Road, a public county road that follows the eastern and northern edges of Lexington Reservoir. Midpen partnered with Santa Clara County Roads to hire wildlife crossing experts who prepared conceptual roadway structures design options during FY23. The structures aim to increase safety for newts as they migrate across the road annually. During FY23, Midpen also applied for Wildlife Conservation Board funding to support the work.



Midpen has been working to provide nesting habitat for purple martins (*Progne subis arboricola*, bottom left), a bird species of special concern and a locally significant population that exists in Santa Clara County. In FY23, Midpen installed three artificial nest cavities and livestream cameras atop Mount Thayer. The wooden pole bird boxes, which differ from standard bird boxes, are a remarkable success and now serve as a model for purple martin nest box construction. Midpen continues to monitor breeding efforts and nest development and share footage on social media with curated ecological information to better inform the public on nest progress as an egg gives way to a chick and eventually a fully-fledged bird.

Top: Skyline Ridge Open Space Preserve (Duane Carbon) Center: (Karine Tokatlian)

Bottom: (Midpen Staff)



STEVENS CREEK SHORELINE NATURE STUDY AREA

This area of the San Francisco Bay shoreline functions as a part of a larger stormwater retention basin for upland developed areas of the Peninsula, to prevent upland flooding impacts. The land also offers critically important habitat for breeding western snowy plovers (*Charadrius alexandrinus nivosus*). This bird species is listed as threatened under the federal Endangered Species Act, with an estimated breeding population of only 2,500. In FY23, Midpen staff and volunteers enhanced the available breeding habitat by distributing oyster shells and 'mud stomping' the otherwise unnaturally flat, uniform mudflat surface. The indentations create opportunities for the plovers to camouflage their nests and hide from predators. Midpen is working in partnership with the San Francisco Bay Bird Observatory to monitor and manage breeding plovers at this site.

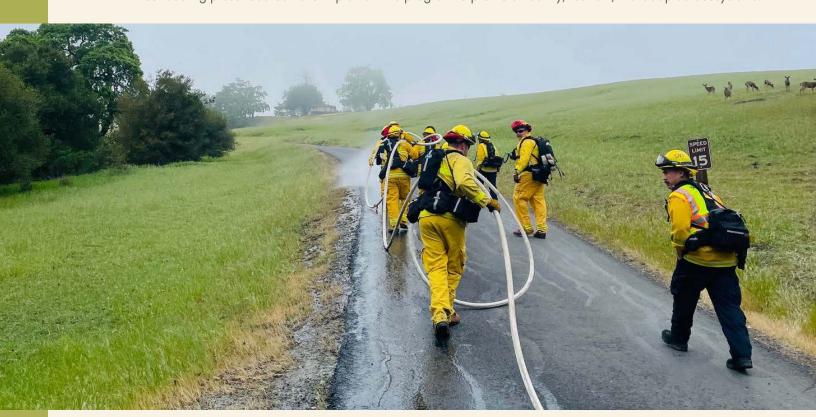
OTHER ACTIONS IN SUPPORT OF NATURAL RESOURCE PROTECTION AND RESTORATION



Coastal grasslands are one of the most biodiverse and threatened ecosystems in North America. To prevent the encroachment of non-native grasses, shrubs and forest, these grasslands require regular disturbance. Historically, disturbance was provided by native grazing animals and Native American burning practices. Today, the use of conservation grazing is utilized to manage invasive vegetation encroachment, reduce wildland fire fuels, protect biodiversity and enhance habitat. With the purchase of Cloverdale Ranch, Midpen added 4 new lease areas to its conservation grazing program.



Our Wildland Fire Resiliency Program contains four main elements to reduce wildland fire severity and risk within our region: vegetation management, preserve maps to assist responding fire agency personnel, landscape monitoring and prescribed fire. Midpen has developed and implemented priority projects focused on improving habitat resilience, which also serves to protect neighboring communities in the wildland urban interface. In FY23, the prescribed fire plan was finalized in partnership with Cal Fire. Midpen's Board certified the Environmental Impact Report addendum and adopted the program in its entirety. Staff are now working on conducting prescribed burns to implement the program to promote healthy, resilient, fire-adapted ecosystems.



Top: Rancho San Antonio Open Space Preserve (Chris Barresi)







Along the peninsula, American badger (*Taxidea taxus*) habitat, population and movement data are limited. For the past three years, Midpen has conducted field research on this rare species with the goal of informing the scientific community's baseline understanding of the population and future management decisions. Results suggest most badger activity within Midpen properties is concentrated within six preserves along Skyline Boulevard/Highway 35, where they may be experiencing physical isolation. Linkages throughout the peninsula are limited to three narrow corridors, resulting in a loss of genetic diversity. In FY23, Midpen prepared the draft manuscript of the research work and findings for broad publication in a peer-reviewed journal to promote the findings to other land managers.

In the densely populated Bay Area, Midpen preserves provide critical remaining habitat for native wildlife such as mountain lions (*Puma concolor*). Midpen is actively improving our understanding of lion populations, ecology and behavior throughout our region through research. To date, the Santa Cruz Puma Project has collared and tracked 24 individual mountain lions, with a target goal of tracking 30 individuals throughout the Santa Cruz Mountains. In FY23, behavioral modification protocols were successfully used on five individuals, nearing the goal of 10 or more to get a significant sample size for data validity. In the coming fiscal years, the Puma Project will analyze the effectiveness of the behavioral modifications on reducing human-mountain lion conflicts. The results will inform management strategies to reduce human-mountain lion conflicts for the protection of the lions and people.

Bats provide many ecosystem benefits through the consumption of insect populations. The nitrogen in their guano adds nutrients to soils and they provide a food source to hawks, falcons and owls. Bats also provide direct benefits to people by reducing harmful insects like mosquitoes and crop pests. Where we find healthy diverse bat populations, we are likely to find highly productive ecosystems. Midpen was added as a partner agency to the U.S. Geological Survey North American Bat Monitoring Program, or NABat, which monitors changes in bat populations throughout the continent. In FY23, detectors were deployed at four locations to determine species composition and activity levels; three of those locations are associated with future, large-scale restoration projects.

Top: Sierra Azul Open Space Preserve (Ken Hickman, overseeing trail-cam) Middle: (Matt-Sharp Chaney)

Bottom: (Ken Hickman)



Public Access, Interpretation, Education & Outreach

Midpen preserves were greatly impacted by this year's destructive winter storms with many preserves and trails sustaining significant damage. Cleanup and repair efforts to safely reopen trails in many locations will continue through the summer and, in the hardest-hit areas, proceed into the fall and spring/summer of 2024.

Overall, the winter storms caused more than \$7.5 million in damages to Midpen preserves. In FY23, Midpen applied for FEMA funding to cover a large portion of the costs.

In the meantime, throughout the year, Midpen crews were hard at work replacing culverts, clearing mudslides, and repairing ruts, gullies and washouts to make trails and roads passable. Crews cleared more than 1,200 downed trees and major limbs that were blocking pathways throughout Midpen preserves.



COAL CREEK PRESERVE

The regional Alpine (Road) Trail is an existing dirt pathway that lies between the end of the paved Alpine Road in the north and Page Mill Road near Skyline Boulevard in the south. Alpine Trail extends approximately 2.3 miles through Coal Creek Open Space Preserve and is an important regional connection between Midpen's South Skyline trail network down to Portola Valley and Woodside.

In FY23, Midpen kicked off onsite construction on the Alpine Regional Trail Improvement Project to correct localized erosion and slope stabilization issues and repurpose the former road alignment into a multiuse regional trail connection.

Phase 1 of the Project was completed in the fall of 2022. The work involved repairing the southern portion of the dirt road from Page Mill Road to Meadow Trail for recreation, maintenance, patrol and private driveway access. From the Meadow Trail to the Crazy Pete's junction in Portola Valley, repairs were made to a minimum 6-footwidth trail standard.

To prepare the former road for trail use, major earth moving work was required to address culvert and slope failures and prevent future sediment impacts to the nearby Corte Madera Creek. A new, narrow and more sustainable bypass trail was also constructed to replace the informal bypass trail. After the new bypass trail settles over the 2023-24 winter season and is ready to be used, the old informal bypass trail will be decommissioned and allowed to naturalize.



Top Left: Coal Creek Open Space Preserve (Kyle Putnum) Left: Coal Creek Open Space Preserve (Ivana Yeung)

LA HONDA CREEK PRESERVE

After numerous meetings to consider the ongoing deterioration and vandalism of a redwood cabin located at La Honda Creek Open Space Preserve and various long-term disposition options for the structure, the Board approved the removal of the cabin and naturalization of the building footprint to return the natural ecological forest values of the site. In FY23, Midpen successfully removed the cabin and documented the history of the site for future interpretation.

PURISIMA CREEK REDWOODS PRESERVE

The vision of a public trail encircling Bay Area ridgetops is being realized piece by piece. Midpen is partnering with San Francisco Public Utilities Commission to plan a new Bay Area Ridge Trail segment on their watershed lands that would terminate near Purisima Creek Redwoods Preserve. In FY23, Midpen engaged stakeholder groups and completed feasibility and technical studies that identified a feasible highway crossing location and future parking expansion at the North Ridge parking area.

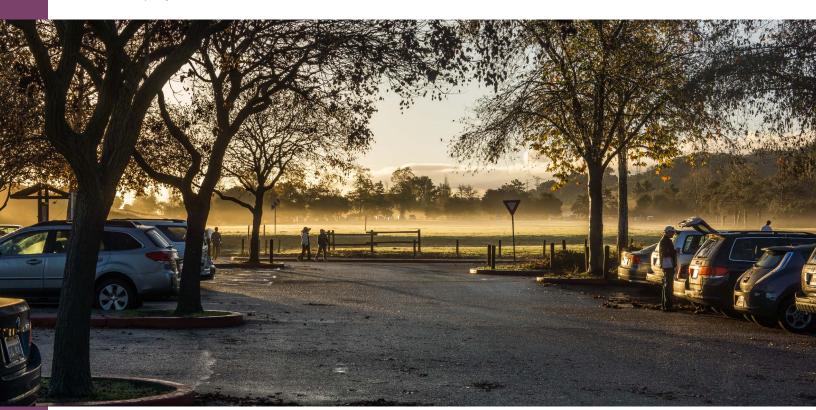
In FY23, Midpen also completed a multimodal access study for the preserve. The Board approved the implementation of transportation demand management strategies to address parking and traffic issues, manage visitation and increase greener modes of transit to the preserve. The study's recommendations are informing the conceptual designs for trail and parking expansion projects planned for the preserve.

In FY23, Midpen also completed feasibility studies for the Purisima-to-the-Sea Regional Trail and Verde Road Parking Area project. The Board approved a preferred trail alignment and the parking area design, connector trails and roadway pedestrian crossings.



RANCHO SAN ANTONIO PRESERVE

Rancho San Antonio Preserve is Midpen's most visited preserve—welcoming over 1 million visitors a year. Midpen has begun implementing the first set of the multimodal access recommendations to improve traffic and parking conditions and promote greener modes of travel to the preserve. In FY23, Midpen installed new bike facilities and dynamic parking signage at the preserve, published a parking status webpage, partnered with the City of Cupertino to pursue future bicycle improvements on Cristo Rey Drive and initiated a carpool lot pilot program.





WINDY HILL PRESERVE

The Hawthorns Area of Windy Hill Open Space Preserve is a 79-acre former estate within Portola Valley named for a hawthorn hedge that once lined its boundary. A public process to explore the feasibility of introducing ecologically sensitive public access to the property is underway. In FY23, the Board approved the vision and goals for the plan. Midpen also completed the data collection, technical studies and existing conditions, opportunities and constraints report needed to inform land management, including natural resource protection and public access recommendations. At the end of FY23, Midpen formed the Hawthorns Public Access Working Group. The working group is comprised of 13 public members who will work with staff to develop public access recommendations that are protective of the natural, cultural, and historic resources of the site.

OTHER ACTIONS IN SUPPORT OF PUBLIC ACCESS, INTERPRETATION AND EDUCATION

Highways connect us, but also divide the land and create barriers to safe passage for both wildlife and people. Midpen continues to work with Caltrans and other partners on a multi-year project to develop, engineer, and implement wildlife and recreational trail crossing improvements at Highway 17. An underground wildlife crossing will reduce vehicle-wildlife collisions and connect over 30,000 acres of protected public lands located on either side of the highway. A separate overcrossing to link numerous regional trails is envisioned for public trail use. Throughout FY23, Midpen made progress toward achieving the goals of the Highway 17 Wildlife and Trail Crossings project by securing new partnerships, holding in-person and virtual public meetings to inform the public of progress, preparing technical reports to inform the final design, and seeking additional funding to augment Measure AA bond funds.



Throughout 2022, Midpen celebrated 50 years of open space and agricultural land preservation, natural resource protection and ecologically sensitive public access through a series of in-person and virtual events and activities. Staff also produced an hour-long documentary special that aired twice in December 2023 on NBC Bay Area showcasing the work and accomplishments of Midpen. Approximately 2,600 people attended the inperson events, including over 1,200 people who participated at the September 2022 Coastside Community Celebration in Half Moon Bay. Overall, the yearlong 50th Anniversary Celebration garnered a total audience/points of participation of nearly 80 million.







In FY23, Midpen expanded its internship program to support our growing open space acreage, public access facilities and visitation levels, as well as advance the Board's goals for diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). Interns provide great support in advancing several special projects. For example, in Summer 2022, two Planning interns collected over 100 miles of qualitative trail data from Midpen preserves. The data will be used to inform visitor's wayfinding, recreation and accessibility decisions. A public-facing web-based tool, *Trail Explorer*, was also developed and released for internal beta testing where this information will be made publicly available to our preserve visitors.

VOLUNTEER AND DOCENT PROGRAMS

Midpen volunteers and docents are vital to furthering the mission and amplifying Midpen's impact. Listed below are just some of the many accomplishments volunteers and docents have contributed this past fiscal year.

Interpretation and Education Programs

Midpen docents are long-term volunteers who engage directly with the public. They educate and inspire through interpretive hikes and bicycle/horseback rides on the trails, hosting visitors on weekends at a scenic nature center, and conducting field trips for elementary school students.



Trail and Stewardship Programs

Trails & Stewardship Program volunteers contribute to meaningful projects to further Midpen's larger strategic goals. Volunteers in these programs deliver hands-on landscape restoration, assist visitors along the trails, contribute to community science, and increase community awareness through both short- and long-term programs.





Assets and Organizational Support

BEAR CREEK REDWOODS PRESERVE

Located within Bear Creek Redwoods Open Space Preserve, Bear Creek Stables is a public boarding and training facility housing up to 72 horses that has been in operation since the 1930s. Midpen is keeping the century-old horse stable operational by pursuing capital maintenance and repairs that allow existing uses and public programs to continue. In FY23, Chaparral Country Corporation (Chaparral) was selected as the concessionaire to operate the stables and implement Board-approved operational goals for the site. Chaparral officially took on management responsibilities in June 2023.



LA HONDA CREEK PRESERVE

The historic Red Barn, originally built around 1900 by the Weeks family in what is now La Honda Creek Open Space Preserve, has greeted travelers on Highway 84 for more than a century. The barn hosts the only known pallid bat maternity roost on the Peninsula as well as individual Townsend's big-eared bats—both species of special concern. In FY23, Midpen replaced the roof to keep the structure stable and weather-proof.

RUSSIAN RIDGE PRESERVE

Midpen continues to assess the condition of vacant structures located within preserves and determine recommendations for disposition. Removing non-historic, deteriorated structures and returning sites to a natural condition enhances habitat by eliminating potential wildlife entrapment hazards and restoring a disturbed area to natural habitat. In FY23, Midpen removed two inherited and deteriorated structures and assessed the conditions and options for two additional structures.

OTHER ACTIONS IN SUPPORT OF ASSETS AND ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPORT

The Board adopted a Climate Action Plan and Climate Change Policy in October 2018 to chart a course for reducing greenhouse gas (GHG) emissions from agency operations. As part of Midpen's Climate Action Plan, FY23 saw a 30% reduction of GHG emissions from the 2016 baseline levels, exceeding the 2022 goal of 20% reductions. Actions taken in FY23 to reduce GHG emissions included the replacement of older vehicles with energy efficient vehicles, travel-to-work commute options and development of a fleet action plan to transition away from fossil fuel reliant vehicles. Energy efficient improvements at Midpen-owned residences and the newly refurbished administrative office also contributed to the overall reduction.



At Midpen, we believe open space is for all. Public lands are shared spaces provided for the community by the community. Consistent with these values, Midpen hired a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Specialist in FY23 to help support our DEI goals internally and externally. One of the first major efforts initiated in FY23 is to conduct an organization-wide assessment of our strengths, weaknesses and gaps. This assessment will inform recommendations to further our DEI work in the coming years.

TECHNOLOGY AND INNOVATION MEET CONSERVATION

Midpen has seamlessly transitioned into the digital era with a stellar suite of tools developed and implemented by talented staff. Below is a list of accomplishments from FY23 related to technology and innovation that drive our mission forward.

Historic Resources Procedural Guide and Library—The framework for this application was completed in June 2023 and is populated with historic resource data. The application provides staff with an authoritative overview of listed, eligible, potentially eligible and ineligible historic resources on Midpen lands to inform future land management decisions.

Districtwide Vegetation Mapping—A fine-scale vegetation map for San Mateo, Santa Clara and Santa Cruz counties was completed and integrated into Midpen's Enterprise GIS database. This tool will help inform management of Midpen preserves and support regional efforts by quantifying vegetation changes and fuels at a landscape scale.

Tyler Munis Enterprise Resource Planning System—Midpen went live with a modern cloud enterprise resource planning system that provides substantially more functionality than the current on-premises solution and enables paperless workflows.

Omnigo Mobile Application—This application allows rangers to enter activity logs and citations when there is no service, moving Midpen toward more paperless processes.

HubSpot—A customer relationship management system streamlines our public communication efforts by consolidating 23,000 postal addresses, 30,000 email contacts and 900 partner contacts. This system also consolidates social media management from six different software applications into a single service.

Disadvantaged Communities Explorer and CA Demographics Data Explorer Dashboards—Compares four common definitions of disadvantaged communities through an interactive map and intuitive infographics. This application is intended to demonstrate to state policymakers the strength of a more inclusive definition of a disadvantaged community to support broader inclusion for state funding programs, including inclusion of under sourced communities that lie within Midpen's jurisdiction. The interactive and content-rich CA Demographics Data Explorer, still in beta, distills and summarizes myriad demographic variables and is an effective outreach tool for policymakers.

Calflora geoPDF Printer—Allows staff to quickly print custom georeferenced PDF maps of plant observations to support invasive plant removal projects.

Purisima-to-the-Sea 3D—Allows staff to visualize potential trail alignment options in a three-dimensional scene to understand opportunities and constraints for the planned Purisima-to-the-Sea Regional Trail Project.

Top 25 StoryMap—Provides a spatial tour of the top 25 Measure AA portfolio projects to support public outreach and understanding.

Trail Explorer Dashboard—Captures trails information to provide to visitors so they can make decisions on which trails to hike, bike and/or ride their horse.

AWARDS & RECOGNITION

In FY23, Midpen received 15 notable awards and special recognition for its projects, programs and efforts.

Recognized as a 2022 GovTech Idea Worth Sharing in the Technology Innovation Category for four (4) IST projects: digital contract process, volunteer engagement, phone system modernization, and new land acquisition system.

Awarded the 2022 Excellence in Technology Award from the California Special Districts Association (CSDA) for the Ward Boundary Redistricting Project.

Awarded the Top 10 Innovation Award from Government Technology Magazine for two (2) projects: Contract Routing Dashboard in DocuSign and Modernized Land Acquisition System.

Received the 2022 Award of Excellence for Transportation Planning from the California Chapter of the American Planning Association for the Rancho San Antonio Multimodal Access Study.

Received the 2023 Preservation Design Award from the California Preservation Foundation for the Alma College Cultural Landscape Plan.

Received the 2023 Award of Excellence for Public Outreach from the American Planning Association—Northern Section for the Purisima Multimodal Access Study.

Received the Project of the Year Award from the International Concrete Repair Institute for the Mount Umunhum Radar Tower Rehabilitation Project.

Received the 2022/23 Liability Risk Management Award from the California Joint Powers Insurance Authority for employing excellent professional risk management practices.

Received the 2022/23 Workers Compensation Risk Management Award from the California Joint Powers Insurance Authority for the quality and care in maintaining worker safety that has led to low worker's compensation claims.

Received the Government Finance Officers Association (GFOA) special Triple Crown medallion for receiving all three (3) GFOA awards in the same year:

Distinguished Budget Presentation Award (seventh year).

Annual Comprehensive Financial Report Award (fifth year)

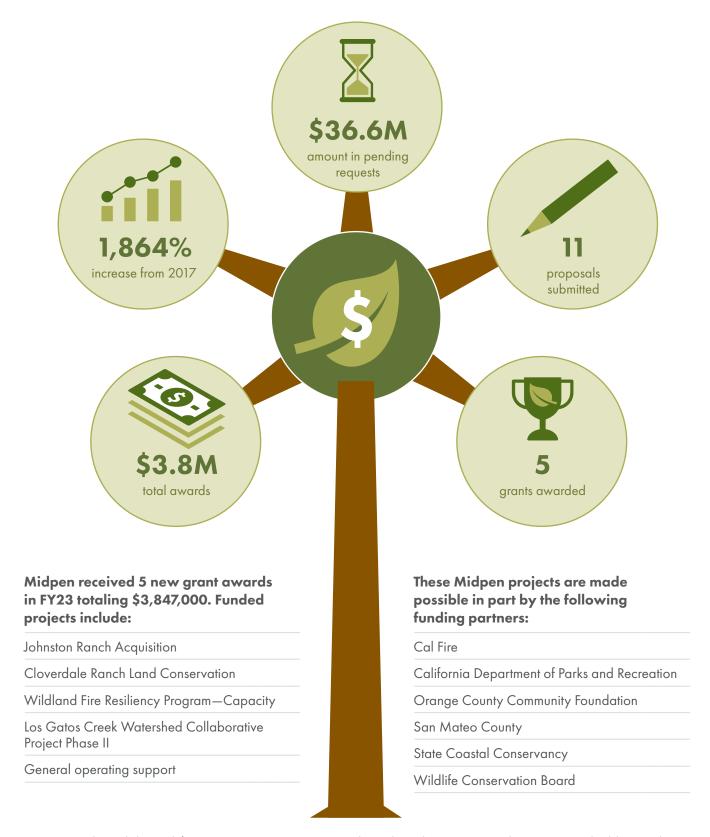
Popular Annual Financial Report Award (fourth year)

Received the California Society of Municipal Finance Officers Budget Award for the fifth straight year.

Published an article in the CSDA Magazine: "Equal Representation: Midpen Uses GIS Technology to Conduct Transparent Redistricting."

Presented the Real Property Database Project at the 2022 Esri User Conference, an international GIS industry event attended by 15,000+ professionals.

GRANTS PROGRAM



Midpen disbursed \$225,499 in FY23 to grantees through Midpen's Grantmaking Program, building and strengthening the environmental community through partnerships.