

Project Identity and Location:

Taylor Mountain Regional Park and Open Space Preserve Master Plan, Sonoma County, CA

Purpose of Project: The Taylor Mountain Regional Park and Open Space Preserve Master Plan's purpose is to provide clear and strategic guidance for the development and ongoing management of over 1,100 acres of scenic oak woodlands, wetlands and grazing land at the southeastern boundary of the city of Santa Rosa. The local landmark was forever protected when it was purchased by the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (District) on behalf of the Sonoma County community. The acquisition of the five separate properties that comprise the Taylor Mountain site, along with completion of this Master Plan, were monumental steps in fulfilling the goals of preserving the scenic and agricultural landscape, and natural resources of Taylor Mountain and adding to an impressive regional greenbelt. The following goals guide the use, development and management of the park and preserve—and were also the driving forces in the preparation of the Master Plan itself.

Conservation Goals:

- Preserve, protect, and enhance the scenic vistas and natural resources of Taylor Mountain.
- Protect ecological processes and conserve native biodiversity.

Recreation Goals:

- Provide recreational and educational opportunities and access for people of all ages and abilities from multiple points of access for multiple modes of transportation.
- Provide facilities and improvements in appropriate locations related to passive and low- to medium-intensity recreational opportunities.

The design philosophy and intent for the Master Plan is one that takes its cues from the land. The areas of the property already impacted by human use (found on the edges of the property) are considered less sensitive and therefore are designated as areas appropriate for development. These "development envelopes" are where improvements and facilities such as parking lots, structures, and camping shall be located. To protect the core habitat areas and agricultural function, the vast majority of land on Taylor Mountain will remain outside of the designated development envelopes and will only be developed with 17 miles of trails, occasional benches, and signage. Cattle grazing will continue outside the development envelopes. All of the improvements and projects planned for the regional park and preserve will incorporate low-impact development (LID) best management practices.

Role of Landscape Architect: Our firm worked closely with two agency clients (the District and Regional Parks), and managed a diverse group of consultants that included biologists, environmental planners, historic architects, a grazing consultant, interpreters, and traffic engineers. One of the most significant aspects of the master planning process was an extensive public outreach effort that included numerous stakeholder meetings, five public workshops, including "Taylor Mountain Day"—a day on the site when our team led guided educational hikes to points of interest to acquaint community members with the property and design concepts.

A central challenge for the landscape architect was finding consensus amongst the various consultants and client team when trying to balance preservation and recreation goals. For example, some of the most spectacular trail destinations coincide with biologically sensitive areas, and the final improvements are a result of much thought and compromise.

Significance: The acquisition of the Taylor Mountain properties ensures that the southern backdrop of the city will be preserved in perpetuity for recreational use and resource protection. The Master Plan process and public outreach interaction between the landscape architects and community highlighted the profession's capability to lead agency and consultant teams in major conservation efforts. The importance of balancing the protection of resources with the provision of public access to natural lands was particularly beneficial to improving the quality of life in the adjacent lower income neighborhoods that are within walking distance to the park.

Special Factors: The Taylor Mountain property rises well above the adjacent urban context and is one of the most prominent landmarks in Sonoma County. It provides a spectacular backdrop to the city of Santa Rosa, and is highly visible from every major road in Santa Rosa and from most places on the Santa Rosa Plain. Expansive views in every direction can be enjoyed from numerous locations on the site. It also boasts a rich, healthy ecosystem of plants and wildlife. Of particular biological significance was the exciting discovery of a large breeding population of California Red-Legged Frogs, a federally listed threatened species.

In addition, the site is rich in cultural resources. It contains the remnants of a large, hot spring tourist resort that dates back to the 1860s, and several prehistoric task-specific sites. The site has also been grazed by cattle for well over 100 years, which will continue into the future. The pros and cons of grazing on the natural environment were carefully considered and woven into the Master Plan.

Because of these reasons, Taylor Mountain was identified as one of the County's highest priorities for acquisition, and master planning for public access. The property was of great interest to environmental groups, trail users, and neighbors, making it a significant public debate issue as a greenbelt project. Balancing the interests of preservationists, neighbors (their backyard), and those advocating public access became a very large challenge. Threats of lawsuits were overcome to reach a unanimous approval.

Soon after the Master Plan was adopted, some of the same advocates that participated in the public workshops volunteered to build the first pilot project. The Todd Creek educational nature trail is the initial phase of a concept called "stacked-loop" trails that overlap and provide more trail miles and route options while impacting fewer acres of sensitive resources in the regional park.

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