
6.0 OPEN SPACE AND CONSERVATION ELEMENT

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6.1 PURPOSE OF THE ELEMENT

St. Helena enjoys a rural setting that includes a wealth of open space resources. The various elements of the City's natural environment -- the wooded hillsides, the cultivated valley lands, and the numerous stream corridors -- provide the foundation for an open space system that can fulfill multiple functions, supporting the community's health, safety, recreation, and natural resources. Within the urban area, parks and other public facilities complement the community's natural open space resources, providing open space for sports and recreation.

State law requires the inclusion of open space and conservation as mandatory elements of the General Plan. The function of the Open Space Element is to address the comprehensive and long-range preservation and conservation of those lands that are essentially unimproved or devoted to open-space uses. The Conservation Element is intended to address the conservation, development and utilization of natural resources. Because there is much overlap in the content and function of the two elements, they have been combined into a single element for the St. Helena General Plan. The policies and programs described in this element promote the management and preservation of open space resources as a strategy to prevent the destruction, degradation, or neglect of the community's natural resources.

The element organizes the discussion of open space and natural resource conservation around four open space categories identified in the State General Plan guidelines. The categories are: open space for the preservation of natural resources; open space for the managed production of natural resources; open space for outdoor recreation; and open space for public health and safety. Any future action by the City to acquire, dispose of, or regulate the use of open space lands in any of these categories must be consistent with this element.

6.2 OPEN SPACE FOR THE PRESERVATION OF NATURAL RESOURCES

Decades of agriculture have done much to reduce the natural resources in St. Helena. Those resources that do exist, while valuable, are no longer in pristine condition. In general, the City's most significant natural resources are located on of two areas: along its stream corridors and in the wooded hillsides to the east and west of town.

Riparian Corridors

St. Helena's riparian habitats are probably the most valuable wildlife resources within the city, increasing in value where surface water is present, providing an important wildlife resource for drinking, bathing, and reproduction. Throughout the valley portion of the city riparian vegetation has been degraded by encroachment of agriculture and urban development, but significant vegetation including large trees, remains in many areas. The Plan seeks to preserve and enhance the riparian corridors and their associated vegetation.

Guiding Policies

- 6.2.1 Preserve and enhance St. Helena's riparian corridors for their value in providing visual amenity, drainage, and wildlife habitat.
- 6.2.2 Where possible, integrate stream corridors with trails and other recreational open space provided that the vegetation and habitat value is not significantly impacted.
- 6.2.3 Protect the riparian vegetation and habitat value of the City's stream corridors by requiring development setbacks and open space easements along the Napa River, Sulphur Creek, York Creek, and Spring Creek.

Setbacks shall be measured from top of the existing bank or the top of the finished bank, where channel improvements are necessary. The width of setbacks shall be established consistent with California Department of Fish and Game standards.

- 6.2.4 Limited development will be permitted on Open Space-designated parcels along Sulphur Springs Creek west of the Crane Avenue Bridge. Development potential on Open Space-designated parcels will be determined in accordance with standards governing parcels designated Agriculture. All development must be outside the stream corridor and structures must be setback from the creek's edge consistent with California Department of Fish and Game standards.

In the area west of the Valleyview/Crane Avenue bridge, the historic channel of Sulphur Springs Creek is broad and ill-defined. In those parcels traversed by Sulphur Springs Creek, the stream corridor appears to comprise the majority of the parcel area, leaving minimal developable area outside the stream corridor. Given the prominence of the stream channel within these parcels and the absence of clear channel delineation, the parcels west of the bridge and adjacent to the creek have been designated as Open Space. The intent of this designation is to preserve riparian areas as an important natural resource. However, as indicated by the above policy, if developable land exists within these parcels, development may be proposed consistent with City regulations. Since these parcels are outside the City's Urban Limit Line and all lands outside the Urban Service Area are designated Agriculture, potential development on Open Space-designated parcels will be subject to the standards established by the Agriculture designation.

- 6.2.5 Maintain stream corridors in a natural condition, and prohibit the culverting of streams.

Implementing Policies

- 6.2.6 Develop standards requiring reasonable restoration of riparian corridors.

- 6.2.7 Consider the establishment of maintenance districts to ensure uniform maintenance for selected channels and creeks.
- 6.2.8 Encourage the development of programs for flow augmentation in the Napa River and its tributaries during period of flow in order to enhance year round fish habitat and minimize stagnation and pollution.
- 6.2.9 Adopt and enforce an ordinance to protect and enhance riparian corridors within St. Helena.

A riparian protection ordinance would designate riparian corridors to be protected and setbacks, and establish guidelines to insure compatibility among agriculture, grazing, developed areas, and resource protection.

Vegetation and Wildlife

The most significant stands of native vegetation, in terms of size and variety, occur on the hillsides on the east and west sides of town. These hillside areas are fairly heavily wooded in most areas, although agriculture and residential development have removed vegetation in some areas. A mixture of six different natural communities are found in these areas, including: Valley and Foothill Grassland, Northern Mixed Chaparral, Oak Forest, Coast Range Mixed Coniferous Forest, Red Alder Riparian Forest, and Alluvial Redwood Forest. The Mixed Coniferous Forest tends to dominate the ridges, while Oak Forests tend to occur more on the down-slope areas. Red Alder Riparian Forest, which is considered sensitive in California due to its relatively recent decline and fragile nature, occurs along intermittent streams in the city, particularly where there are poorly aerated, marshy soils and seasonally variable water table depths. Redwood Alluvial Forest, which are typically confined to northern exposures and canyon bottoms with shallow, well-drained soils, are located along the higher elevations of Sulphur Springs Creek outside the city limits.

No rare or endangered or special status plant species have been identified in the city. Habitat in the city is suitable, however, to support five different special status species (federal candidate 1 and 2 status), including: Baker's manzanita (*Arctostaphylos bakeri*), Clara Hunt's milk vetch (*Astragalus clarianus*), Calistoga ceanothus (*Ceanothus divergens*), Rincon Ridge ceanothus (*Ceanothus confusus*), and Sonoma ceanothus (*Ceanothus sonomensis*). The habitat for each of these species is located in the dry upland forest or chaparral communities within the city.

Each of the natural communities in the city supports a range wildlife species. Overall the city is a habitat for a number of naturally occurring mammals, birds, amphibians, and reptiles. Typical mammals include gophers, rabbits, mice, rats, and moles, with occasional sightings of deer, raccoon, opossum, or skunk. Birds include blackbirds, woodpeckers, jays, magpies, starlings, sparrows, finches, quail, pigeons, and robins. Amphibians include newts, toads, salamanders, and frogs. Representative reptiles include garter snakes, gopher snakes, rattle snakes, and western fence, coast horned, and alligator lizards.

No rare, endangered or special status wildlife species have been identified in the city. The stream corridors in St. Helena do provide suitable habitat for the California freshwater shrimp (*Syncaris pacifica*), a federally- and state-listed endangered specie which occurs in small stretches of low gradient streams throughout Marin, Sonoma, and Napa counties. This species continues to be endangered by water diversion, watershed erosion, stream sedimentation, riparian removal, agricultural development, grazing, and urbanization.

Guiding Policies

- 6.2.10 Protect natural habitats which have the potential to support rare, endangered, or special status wildlife and plant species.
- 6.2.11 Preserve St. Helena's streams and associated riparian corridors as natural open space corridors.
- 6.2.12 Restrict development of hillside areas in order to protect wildlife, vegetation and open space characteristics of the area.

Implementing Policies

- 6.2.13 Require new development to be sited to maximize the protection of native tree species, riparian vegetation, important concentrations of natural plants, and important wildlife habitat.
- 6.2.14 Require all proposed projects adjacent to a riparian corridor or located in the city's hillside areas, to submit management plans for protecting natural habitat values, including provision to:
 - Employ supplemental planting and maintenance of grasses, shrubs and trees of similar quality and quantity to provide adequate vegetation cover to keep the water sheds, on steep slopes and along streams, in good condition and to provide shelter and food for wildlife.
 - Provide protection for wildlife habitat.
 - Provide replacement habitat of like quantity and quality.
- 6.2.15 Require a biological assessment of any proposed project site where species or the habitat of species defined as sensitive or special status by the California Department of Fish and Game or the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service might be present.

6.3 OPEN SPACE FOR THE MANAGED PRODUCTION OF RESOURCES

This section of the Open Space Element addresses the conservation and use of open space lands for the commercial production of resources or products. The General Plan Land Use Map does not specifically designate any land as "open space for the managed production of resources", but two types of open space use are recognized as significant for their commercial value: agriculture and gravel mining.

Agriculture

Agriculture is by far the most significant use of open space for production purposes. Agricultural lands currently comprise 47% of the incorporated area, and of that total, the majority of acres are actively cultivated with vineyards. Agriculture's value to the community is discussed in several contexts in the General Plan, but particularly in the Land Use & Growth Management Element. The Valley soils on which the City is situated generally consist of very deep alluvium that are particularly well-suited to growing wine grapes. The Napa County Soil Survey designates the bottom lands of the Valley as "prime" farmland, which means they offer the best combination of physical and chemical features for the production of agricultural crops. Given the location of the city on the valley floor, the City is faced with a situation in which any expansion of the urban area from its core will result in a loss of prime agricultural land and production potential.

It is the City's intent to preserve agricultural uses within the City Limits indefinitely. Toward this end, the Plan takes several steps to protect prime agricultural lands from unnecessary or premature urban encroachment, including the establishment of an Urban Limit Line. All of the agriculturally-designated acreage in the city is located outside the urban service area, and is thus protected from any immediate threat from urbanization. Although vineyard lands are quite valuable, their economic value on the real estate market cannot be assumed to provide protection from conversion to urban uses because the value of the land for urban uses could vastly exceed the value for agricultural use.

Guiding Policies

- 6.3.1 Maintain agriculture as the mainstay of the local economy by preserving agriculturally-designated lands as an invaluable and irreplaceable open space resource.

Refer to the discussion of agriculture in the Land Use and Growth Management Element for policies relating to agriculture.

Aggregate Mining

The California Division of Mines and Geology describes surface materials in the St. Helena area as "recent alluvium". The depth of the alluvium is likely to be in the range of 250 to 500 feet. There are no known mineral deposits of significance within the City. The only known resource worth extracting is the aggregate (gravel) being mined from the stream bed of Sulphur Springs Creek, just west of Highway 29. The gravel quarry extracts an average of 15,200 cubic yards of river run gravel per year. The seasonal

operation removes sand and gravel during the dry season that has been naturally deposited by winter flows. The river run gravel is crushed and screened onsite to produce aggregate road base (90%) and various sizes of washed aggregates and backfill sand for general sale (10%). Since the supply of aggregate is naturally replenished each year, the mining operation could continue indefinitely.

Guiding Policies

- 6.3.2 Allow existing gravel mining operations along Sulphur Springs Creek to continue for as long as such operations are productive and economically viable.

Implementing Policies

- 6.3.3 Require the owner/operator of the gravel mining operation on Sulphur Springs Creek to reclaim the stream corridor area once mining activities have ceased, consistent with City-adopted reclamation plan.

6.4 OPEN SPACE FOR OUTDOOR RECREATION

Historically, the City has not taken full advantage of its open space resources for public recreation. Given the rural setting, the need to set aside open space areas for public recreation has not been perceived as a high priority. However, the City does have resources it should protect and develop, and their value to the community well-being will increase as the community continues to grow. The General Plan envisions a comprehensive, integrated open space system of parks, trails, and open spaces that serve the needs of residents and visitors for recreational areas, and provide a natural framework for future development.

From the standpoint of recreation, the most important open space resources are the stream corridors that pass through the City. Together, the Napa River, Sulphur Springs Creek, York Creek, and Spring Creek, provide the potential to create a network of trails that would link the various parts of the city. An interconnected pedestrian/bicycle/equestrian trail system would allow for the movement of residents and visitors throughout the city without the need of a car, while also protecting and enhancing valuable riparian habitat areas.

In addition to the following policies, the Parks & Recreation Element discusses in more detail the City's existing recreation facilities and the need to maintain and expand these facilities. Text and policies addressing the relationship between the City's parks and recreation facilities and recreational open space can be found in Chapter 7: Parks and Recreation Element. Figure 6-1 illustrates the various components of the City's open space system.

Guiding Policies

- 6.4.1 Preserve natural creek corridors as the principal components of an integrated open space system.
- 6.4.2 Develop a trail system within stream corridors to accommodate pedestrians, bicyclists, and equestrians if compatible with riparian vegetation and wildlife habitat.
- 6.4.3 Ensure convenient public access between developed areas and stream corridors by providing access at frequent intervals.
- 6.4.4 Ensure adequate access to open space areas for maintenance and management purposes.
- 6.4.5 Revegetate stream corridors that have been degraded by agriculture or other past practices, with native vegetation in order to enhance their value for habitat and recreation.
- 6.4.6 Require developers to dedicate land and improvements (i.e., trails, revegetation, etc.) along both sides of stream corridors as a condition of subdivision approval. The width of dedicated corridors should be established in consultation with the California Department of Fish and Game.
- 6.4.7 Preclude public access to habitat areas when public access will significantly impact the value of the habitat area.
- 6.4.8 Provide for open space opportunities by including passive and active recreation areas within projects as agricultural areas develop.

Implementing Policies

- 6.4.9 Develop a trails master plan that establishes alignments for proposed trails, design standards for trails and amenities, phasing, and funding mechanisms.
- 6.4.10 Determine the appropriate funding mechanism(s) (e.g., a landscape assessment district, real estate transfer tax, transient-occupancy tax, bond measure, etc.) for initial improvements and the long-term maintenance of the trail system.

6.5 OPEN SPACE FOR PUBLIC HEALTH AND SAFETY

The only open space issue relating to public health and safety is the potential for flood hazards along the Napa River and Sulphur Springs Creek. Text and policies pertaining to flood safety are included in the Public Health and Safety Element in Section 8.6.

6.6 PRESERVATION AND PROVISION OF TREES

The City recognizes that the planting and preservation of trees enhance the natural scenic beauty, increases life giving oxygen, promotes ecological balance, promotes natural ventilation, air filtration, cooler street and public spaces, erosion and acoustical controls, increases property values, and improves the well being and quality of life enjoyed by the residents of the City of St. Helena. Trees are an integral part of open space and contribute to the visual and physical environment of the City.

Guiding Policies

- 6.4.11 Integrate existing significant trees into future development.
- 6.4.12 Require replacement trees where existing significant trees cannot be saved.
- 6.4.13 Require street trees as a condition of new development.

Implementing Policies

- 6.4.14 Develop and adopt a Tree Ordinance for the purpose of protecting trees and providing for replacement trees in the City.
- 6.4.15 Review existing City standards and adopt standards regarding street trees for new and existing streets.