

TO: Honorable Mayor and Councilmembers

DATE: October 3, 2023

FROM: Kate Laddish, Chair, and Kurt Balasek, Past Chair, City of Winters Natural Resources Commission

SUBJECT: Natural Resources Commission Workplan Update to Winters City Council

Mission and Membership

The Winters City Council established the Winters Natural Resources Commission on September 7, 2021, with Resolution No. 2021-55. A successor to the Winters Putah Creek Committee, the Commission is charged with making recommendations to City Council and Planning Commission on preservation, conservation, and enhancement of natural resources important to the City. The Commission also provides technical expertise to the City and the community, develops and implements public information programs related to increasing awareness of and promoting the stewardship of natural resources, and supports staff as a “force multiplier” by conducting research, preparing reports and grant applications, and developing recommendations based on subject-matter expertise.

Natural resources in this context include, but are not limited to:

- Geologic and hydrogeologic resources
- Hydrologic resources
- Biologic resources
- Ecologic resources
- Atmospheric resources
- Fire-related resources

The six members of the Commission are residents of Winters or nearby unincorporated areas with interest or expertise in natural resources. Five are appointed by Council for four-year terms, and one is appointed by Lower Putah Creek Coordinating Committee (LPCCC). The City Council, Planning Commission, and Climate Action Commission each appoint a non-voting liaison to the Natural Resources Commission. The Natural Resources Commission appoints a liaison to the Climate Action Commission.

Members of the Natural Resources Commission are:

- Kate Laddish, Chair (Loren appointee)
- Eric Jepsen, Vice Chair (Vallecillo appointee)
- Kurt Balasek (Biasi appointee)
- Melanie Ellison (Scianna appointee)
- Rich Marovich (Casavecchia appointee)
- Dennis Kilkenny (LPCCC appointee)

Since our 2022 update, Commissioner Patrick Wall concluded his service, and Commissioner Carol Scianna was elected to the City Council. Commissioners Ellison and Marovich were appointed, and Commissioner Jepsen was reappointed. Also, the

Commission passed a resolution recognizing the service of longtime Committee and Commission member Eric Larsen, who had concluded his service.

The Winters Natural Resources Commission receives updates from City staff and outside organizations engaging with the resources within the Commission's purview. The Commission may also receive presentations related to specific projects or to enhance the Commission's knowledge about resources. Liaisons and partners include:

- Councilmember Carol Scianna, City Council
- Streamkeeper Max Stevenson, LPCCC & Solano County Water Agency
- Phil Stevens, Putah Creek Council
- Chris Rose, Solano County Resource Conservation District
- Tanya Meyer, Yolo County Resource Conservation District

Environmental Services Manager Kristine DeGuerre is staff to the Commission.

Workplan Update

In March 2022, the Commission approved an initial workplan, which we presented to Council. Last year, the Commission described work on our first two projects, related to trees and air quality. Today's report includes an update on those projects and information on seven additional projects.

City of Winters Master Tree List

The City, residents, businesses, and developers use the City's Master Tree List to select the most appropriate trees to plant based on setting and purpose. However, the list has not been updated since February 7, 2006.

At its June 26, 2023, meeting, the Commission voted unanimously to approve an updated Master Tree List for use in guiding City and private planting of trees. The list prioritizes native and drought-tolerant trees and considers tree species relative to available planting space, aesthetic objectives, flammability, and other considerations. The list is intended to be a "living document" subject to periodic review and updates. Arborist and Commissioner Melanie Ellison, Councilmember Carol Scianna, and former Commissioner Patrick Wall were leads on this project.

Next steps: The Commission-approved Master Tree List will go to the Planning Commission for review at their next meeting, before being submitted to City Council for adoption.

Air Quality Monitor and Forecasts

Because there is no regulatory-quality air quality monitor in Winters linked to the Yolo-Solano Air Quality Management District, California Air Resources Board, or Environmental Protection Agency networks, such as EnviroFlash, air quality forecasts and regulatory measurements for Winters are obtained from a station in Vacaville. The

Commission was concerned that the inability to get Winters-specific air quality forecasts or accurate real-time readings, especially for particulates related to smoke, could negatively affect the City's, businesses', and residents' abilities to make informed decisions. While there are PurpleAir monitors in Winters, including at the City corporation yard, these readings are not used for EPA forecasts or official readings.

The Commission explored placement of a regulatory air quality monitor in Winters, with particular interest in improving local particulate (PM₁₀) readings and forecasts. Commissioner Kate Laddish spoke and emailed with Deputy Air Pollution Control Officer Paul Hensleigh of Yolo-Solano Air Quality Management District; he then met with the full Commission in October 2022.

A regulatory air quality monitor would cost YSAQMD approximately \$100,000, and Mr. Hensleigh said that studies had shown that Vacaville and Winters air quality is close enough that YSAQMD does not feel Winters needs its own regulatory monitor. YSAQMD has three PurpleAir monitors in Winters. While the EPA air quality website (airnow.gov) and AirNow app show Vacaville readings for the Winters ZIP code, people can access the combined PurpleAir and regulatory networks by using the EPA's fire and smoke map (fire.airnow.gov) or the "Smoke" section on the AirNow app.

Next steps: Based on Mr. Hensleigh's input, the Commission is not currently pursuing getting a regulatory monitor for Winters. Instead, the Commission is refocusing efforts toward education on how to get air quality information for Winters, such as by including information and links on the City's website. There are ongoing outreach opportunities.

Ground Water

The Committee has received presentations from Kristen Sicke, General Manager of Yolo County Flood Control and Water Conservation District, and Grant Davids, resident of Golden Bear and retired agricultural water consultant, focused on land use changes, such as planting of perennial nut crops, in Yolo County and potential impacts on groundwater resources. The area around Winters has been identified as one of three "areas of special concern" in Yolo County where groundwater levels appear to be declining over time. Since Governor Newsom's executive order, the Sustainable Groundwater Associations have been tasked with assisting local jurisdictions with review of groundwater well permitting. This is especially important in the areas of special concern like Winters. California groundwater law is tricky, so restricting drilling can be litigious. More likely, there will be added requirements for hydrogeologic assessment prior to well permit approvals.

As part of a broader Yolo Subbasin submittal, the City submitted two groundwater-related grant proposals, totaling \$400,000¹, to the California Department of Water Resources, which posted a notification of intent to fund both proposals. The two projects include a pilot study for wastewater reuse prepared by Commissioner Balasek and an alternative water source investigation prepared by Grant Davids.

¹ Per Commissioner Balasek on Oct. 3, 2023, the revised number is \$580,000.

Next steps: The Commission will work with City staff to scope these proposals and retain consultants once funding is confirmed.

Putah Creek Nature Park Management and Coordination

Numerous partners, including the City of Winters, Putah Creek Council (PCC), Lower Putah Creek Coordinating Committee, Solano County Water Agency (SCWA), Solano Resource Conservation District (SRCD), and Yolo County Resource Conservation District, do work in the Winters Putah Creek Nature Park. While most of these partners regularly send representatives to Commission meetings, there had not been a formalized system for coordinating management and communicating about projects, concerns, and opportunities.

The Commission focused on three significant areas of concern related to the Nature Park.

- 1) Roles, authorities and responsibilities for maintenance and vegetation management, including weed control and code enforcement
- 2) Funding for same
- 3) Communication between partners to avoid duplicating efforts, working at cross purposes, or leaving essential tasks undone

Next steps: At the June 26, 2023, meeting, the Commission formally empaneled an ad hoc committee consisting of Phil Stevens (PCC), Max Stevenson (LPCCC Streamkeeper; SCWA), Chris Rose (SRCD), Eric Lucero (City of Winters), and Miles DePrato (Winters resident and Environmental Steward at the UC Davis Putah Creek Riparian Reserve) to develop one-year and five-year plans, review weed and vegetation management, review and update the 2007 Vegetation Management Plan and the 2016 Putah Creek Weed Abatement Workplan, and implement a communication and coordination system.

Environmental Services Manager Kristine DeGuerre will be the point of contact for all work being done in the Nature Park.

City staff has agreed to research and post vehicle code violation signs in an effort to reduce motorized traffic on pedestrian pathways and other park locations. Future discussions will include appropriate electric bicycle and scooter use.

Elderberry Safe Harbor Agreement

Commissioner Marovich advocated at our June and July meetings for establishing an Elderberry Safe Harbor Agreement with U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS). The agreement would enable management of elderberry shrubs that have been planted as part of the Nature Park vegetation palette without having to seek a permit from USFWS each time.

Next steps: Commissioner Marovich and Councilmember Scianna will set up a meeting with USFWS staff to outline various protected activities such as plant maintenance, spraying, trimming, removing, and replacing. Eric Lucero and Kristine DeGuerre of City staff should be involved as well.

Sacramento Westside Integrated Regional Water Management Oak Planting Grant

In the Putah Creek Nature Park, the paved path on the north bank between the two Creekside Way entrances is largely unshaded, locally increasing the effects of summer heat and making the path difficult to use in hot weather. The lack of trees is also a missed habitat opportunity. On behalf of the City, Commissioner Marovich secured \$5,000 from Sacramento Westside Integrated Regional Water Management to plant 50 valley oaks, as well as Santa Barbara sedge companion plantings, along the south side of that stretch of trail.

Next steps: As of the Commission's September meeting, the trees and sedges had been ordered from Putah Creek Council, and the mulch was in place. Local Rotary Clubs will do the planting this autumn.

Fire Resiliency

In September, the Commission received a presentation from Tanya Meyer of Yolo County Resource Conservation District (YCRCD) and Yolo County Fire Safe Council (YCFSC) regarding \$297,000 in funding for four Winters-area projects to reduce fire hazards, including \$100,000 for fuel reduction in the Putah Creek and Dry Creek riparian corridors and \$34,000 to create fire buffers in the grasslands north and west of Winters. She is also in conversation with Winters Fire Chief Jack Snyder III about these issues. There is money for these projects as a result of advocacy with State Senator Bill Dodd that was based on needs identified in the Greater Winters Area Post-LNU Fires Community Problem-Solving Project.

In recent meetings, the Commission has also discussed fire-wise building materials and practices and naturally fire-resistant native tree species and will continue to engage in local fire-safe issues and coordinate with organizations like Winters Fire Department and YCRCD and YCFSC to explore additional grant opportunities and balance creekside fuel reduction with other restoration and management activities.

Next steps: Chief Snyder, Tanya Meyer, and members of the Commission's Putah Creek Nature Park Management Ad Hoc Committee will continue to discuss the current projects, and will report back to the Commission.

The City Council, the Planning Commission, and the Commission could invite Chief Snyder and Yolo and Solano Fire Safe Council representatives to present about fire-wise construction, modifications, design, and assistance.

Winters Salmon Festival Participation

Several members of the Commission have committed volunteer time to help organize and operate the annual Winters Salmon Festival.

Next steps: The 2023 Winters Salmon Festival will be on Saturday, November 4, in Rotary Park.

Light Pollution and Lighting Ordinance

Light pollution—the inappropriate or excessive use of artificial light—can have serious consequences for humans, wildlife (including pollinators), and our climate. The Commission believes that a night sky minimally impacted by light pollution is important to retaining our community’s small-town, rural character.

There are four components of light pollution:

- Glare – excessive brightness that causes visual discomfort
- Skyglow – brightening of the night sky over inhabited areas
- Light trespass – light falling where it is not intended or needed
- Clutter – bright, confusing and excessive groupings of light sources

Initial research by the Commission’s light pollution subcommittee, Commissioners Laddish and Jepsen, shows that Winters’ light pollution has increased significantly in the last eight to 10 years, and that some recent projects have not followed recommended lighting practices. For example, new street lights in the Winters Highlands area, along East Baker by Blue Mountain Terrace and the future Winters Senior Center, and at the roundabout are unshielded “acorn”-style lights that produce cool blue-white light (rather than shielded fixtures/standards and lamps that emit warm light), and are in dense arrays rather than at corners, as would be consistent with small-town or rural lighting practices.

Lighting is addressed in the Winters Design Guidelines (adopted in 1993 and 1999), which include, “Lighting should be consistent with the small town character being stressed.” The Winters Municipal Code currently has general provisions relating to exterior lighting for the downtown area and private parking lots (Municipal Code Chapters 17.58 & 17.72), requiring lights to be down shielded and restricting spillover on adjacent properties. The Grant Avenue Design Guidelines also address exterior lighting.

However, unlike many jurisdictions, the City of Winters does not have a stand-alone lighting ordinance. The Commission has explored updating relevant parts of code or implementing a lighting ordinance (such a rural lighting scheme or DarkSky’s model lighting ordinance) that incorporates practices to minimize light pollution.

Next steps: Former Senior Planner Kirk Skierski recommended “a new comprehensive exterior lighting chapter be created for the Municipal Code rather than updating existing Municipal Code Chapters.” He recommended that the Commission present to Council to gather direction as the first step, which would help shape a draft exterior lighting ordinance. He explained that a new exterior lighting ordinance would require amending or revising lighting references in the Municipal Code and “amending the City’s Design Guidelines and Grant Avenue Design Guidelines to comply with a new exterior lighting ordinance and make it further enforceable.”

Developments and other projects approved before we have a comprehensive lighting ordinance are missed opportunities, so the Commission is eager to keep moving forward. Direction about use of staff time would come from Council, not the Commission. Council could chose to direct the Commission to return to Council at a future meeting to discuss a possible lighting ordinance, so the Commission and staff could present options and Council could give direction.

Supporting Our Mission

The Commission has identified actions the City Council can take that would help support our mission to preserve, conserve, and enhance our natural resources.

- Direct staff and the Commission to develop a comprehensive exterior lighting ordinance. A next step could be requesting the Commission return to Council with lighting as a discussion item. To be most effective, the City would have an ordinance in place before additional projects work their way through the City process.
- Take further steps to increase wildfire resilience within the City as well as nearby rural areas, perhaps starting with inviting Chief Snyder and Tanya Meyer (YCRCD) and Chris Rose (SRCD) to present to the City Council and Planning Commission about fire-wise construction, modifications, and design options.
- Adopt the updated Master Tree List when it is presented to Council.
- When establishing the proposed Parks, Recreation, and Multigenerational Services Commission, leave the Winters Putah Creek Nature Park in the Natural Resources Commission’s portfolio, since it dovetails with the Commission’s experience and expertise.