

DAVENPORT/NORTH COAST ASSOCIATION
P.O. BOX 251, Davenport, CA 95017

December 11, 2023

Robert Tidmore, Park Planner IV
Santa Cruz County Parks Department
979 17th Avenue
Santa Cruz, CA 95062

Dear Mr. Tidmore:

This letter conveys Davenport/North Coast Association's comments on the draft public version of the North Coast Facilities and Management Plan (dated October 2023 and released to stakeholders November 9). The Davenport/North Coast Association (DNCA) is an elected community council, which has been working as the conduit between North Coast communities and state and county agencies for over 50 years. We have nine board members, many of whom have been involved in land planning and environmental issues on the North Coast for decades, and a number of whom are environmental or planning professionals. We have an email list of over 400 95017 residents.

DNCA commends the California Coastal Conservancy and California State Parks for providing the funding to support the study process. We recognize the major commitment by County Parks in managing the consultant work and the process overall. You and your predecessor as project manager, Michael Hettenhausen, deserve major credit for effective leadership and good humor throughout.

The North Coast Facilities and Management Plan (NCFMP) represents a milestone, taking for the first time a corridor-wide and multi-agency approach to assessing the challenges and exploring solutions for the north coast. The plan highlights the need for investment to assure public safety and a quality visitor experience. It catalogs major capital investment needs by geography, not agency. It recognizes that jurisdictional realities complicate solutions and commits to ongoing coordination and collaboration that will be essential to overcoming those jurisdictional challenges. It should provide a framework for prioritizing investment by need, irrespective of the agency or agencies involved or degree of jurisdictional complexity.

In any complex multi-stakeholder process, constraints of budget and time mean that no individual stakeholder will be fully satisfied with the result, and in this instance, as you know from recent public meetings, DNCA is no exception. We believe that the NCFMP process provides an excellent platform on which to build toward future solutions but that the draft falls short of its potential in significant respects.

Staff has solicited input on priorities through a web-based ranking tool or, as an alternative, in general comments to you. For a geography in which capital improvements have been underfunded for decades, and where needs reflect a variety of urgent issues involving public safety,

environmental protection, and the visitor's experience, DNCA has found it very difficult to prioritize one specific project against another. (We found it confusing, further, that projects already fully funded and, in one case, under construction were included on the prioritization list.) Instead, we hope to help foster a consensus that acknowledges cumulative capital improvement and operating fund deficits and to prompt an effort to remedy that deficit as soon as possible in a comprehensive rather than a piecemeal fashion.

In the interest of having the plan function effectively as a starting point for this effort, DNCA offers the following observations, comments, and recommendations.

Our key concerns with the draft plan can be summarized as follows:

- The plan does not prioritize for public safety.
- The plan does not recognize the severity of environmental degradation on the North Coast and the statutory mandates for landowners to maintain and restore natural and cultural resources.
- The plan seems to accept as inevitable a continuing siloed approach to project delivery, with functionally related and geographically proximate project elements implemented over decades rather than in parallel (we cite below the Yellowbank/Panther cluster of improvements as an example of this).
- The plan does not address policy conflicts that pose roadblocks to progress, in particular the Coastal Commission's insistence on 24-hour parking.
- The plan does not consider short term measures that would provide near term benefits, enhance visitor safety, and reduce emergency response costs without major cost.

A detailed discussion of these issues follows.

- **Public safety.** Current traffic conditions on the North Coast create hazards for motorists, bicyclists, and pedestrians. Beach visitors face dangers at most beaches and beach approaches, of which they are poorly advised by current signage (where it even exists). In just the time since the launch of this planning process, there have been multiple deaths and accidents causing serious injury on the North Coast. The NCFMP should more explicitly embrace a screen for safety issues at the outset, supported by updated traffic counts and a catalog of accidents and emergency response by type and location over the past decade to establish a baseline record.

For traffic and pedestrian safety issues, DNCA hopes that this need will be addressed in the upcoming RTC/Caltrans corridor safety and alternatives study. We plan to participate in that process and will continue to urge attention to unsafe conditions along Cement Plant Road, at the Cement Plant Road/Davenport Landing/Highway 1 intersection, in the pedestrian crossings of Highway 1 in old town Davenport, at Shark Fin beach, and so on. We have concerns about the transition to a crosswalk and demand-initiated flashing light at the new Davenport crosswalk, including how motorists will adapt to the change from an always-flashing, largely ignored pedestrian warning signal to a new pattern. We will also address these concerns with RTC.

DNCA is also very pleased that RTC and the County have committed to a focused study of bicycle and pedestrian connectivity issues between old town Davenport, New Town, and the Northern Trailhead of Cotoni-Coast Dairies. Opening the BLM northern parking lot and trail system to public use will exacerbate serious existing pedestrian and bicycle safety risks at the southern end of Cement Plant Road and through New Town, necessitating accelerated attention to creative solutions. We look forward to working on the development and implementation of safety improvements as a matter of urgent concern, understanding the process will take time and solutions will not likely be in place by the time the monument opens.

- **Natural resource management obligations.** The plan would benefit from a clearer and more accurate depiction of natural resource issues in the context of North Coast planning and management. On page 5 the plan notes that most North Coast lands are “held in trust with mandates for public access.” In fact, Federal, State, County, and NGO-owned lands on the North Coast are held in trust with mandates for natural and cultural resource protection. In the case of federal lands, the Monument is managed as part of the National Conservation Lands System under a statute that prioritizes “cultural, ecological, and scientific values.” (16 U.S. Code §7207) and allows public use to the extent consistent with that overall mandate. State Parks’ core mission is to “promote and regulate the use of the state park system in a manner that conserves the scenery, natural and historic resources, and wildlife in the individual units of the system for the enjoyment of future generations.” (Resources Code §5001.2)

Similarly, the California Coastal Commission – not a landowner but a critical regulatory agency – has a mandate to provide “maximum access ... consistent with public safety needs and the need to protect ... natural resource areas from overuse.” (Resources Code §30210) The Commission is additionally instructed by statute to limit public access “where: (1) it is inconsistent with public safety ... or the protection of fragile coastal resources ...” (Resources Code §30212)

Natural and cultural resource protection and public access are not inherently in conflict, but protection does not happen passively. Acquisition does not secure protection. Natural and cultural resources restoration and protection require planning, monitoring, and budgets for implementation. There are important ways in which the public can function as an ally for protection, but this in turn requires interpretation, signage, and agency-supported avenues for engagement that are lacking at present on the North Coast.

Reasonable limitations on public access (and enforcement) can yield major benefits for the environment and for public safety. For example, restricting night-time use of beaches, as State Parks and BLM recognize that they are obligated to do, avoids impacting nocturnal use by animals and the public safety and fire hazards associated with night-time access and use. (We argue below that the Coastal Commission’s inexplicable opposition to restrictions on night-time use is an issue also warranting explicit treatment in the NCFMP.) The final plan would benefit from a clearer depiction of these issues.

- Safety and resource management would benefit from **clearer and consistent signage**. Signage was discussed early in the plan development and is included in the formulation of plan goals and mentioned in the context of several specific projects. A stand-alone corridor-long signage program could yield major short-term benefits at a relatively low capital cost.
- **Chronic capital under-investment**. The COVID era brought a spike in visitation to the North Coast which exacerbated and illuminated ongoing problems and was part of the impetus for funding the NCFMP. In setting the stage for an assessment of problems and solutions for the North Coast, however, the Plan would benefit from the articulation of a deeper historical perspective. North Coast traffic and safety challenges did not begin with COVID; capital needs related to North Coast safety and visitor support have been underfunded for decades. It's worth recalling that when State Parks accepted ownership and management responsibility for the coast-side portion of the Coast Dairies property nearly 20 years ago, it received some additional funding for staffing, but in a limited amount that only slightly slowed the growing gap between resources available and need imposed by increased visitor use. The State has provided no funding for safety, access, or resource protection projects on the Coast Dairies properties. The DNCA has been articulating the need for a coordinated cross-agency improvements for visitors to the North Coast for decades, yet the shortcomings have yet to be addressed by the State.
- **Chronic O&M under-funding**. The grant proposal to the Coastal Conservancy for this project recognized that “An urgent need exists for coordination between the agencies to develop a plan for recreation management, identifying needed visitor facilities, **and the funding to implement and maintain them**” (emphasis added). Although the plan provides useful data for estimating incremental operating costs associated with new toilets and trash receptacles, it devotes only a portion of one sentence to the question of sources of revenue to support operations. That sentence, on page 79, reads “Existing fiscal resources at each level have the potential to be augmented by new revenue sources such as dedicated new taxes, various types of new assessment districts or service districts, and issuance of bonds for major capital projects.”

The plan may be useful in attracting capital to needed new projects, but it is important to recognize that success in that regard will inevitably increase the large and growing gap between visitation and operational/maintenance funding – experienced by State Parks at a massive scale and by all other land-owning and managing entities. It will continue the 20-year trend of adding to the amenities that attract visitors to the North Coast – like the National Monument, Coast Dairies State Parks areas, and the Rail Trail – without commensurate operational funding increases for the law enforcement, emergency response, interpretation, sanitation/trash, and natural and cultural resources protection necessary to assure a safe and rewarding visitor experience. DNCA urges that the plan articulate this as a major issue and unmet need; DNCA will continue to encourage the coordinating group to make the issue of revenue to support O&M a priority.

- This underfunding is exacerbated by **conflicting policies**. Here are two examples: 1) State Parks invests in new parking only when it is paid parking that provides revenue to

support operational safety and is subject to restrictions on hours of use consistent with its mandate for visitor safety and natural and cultural resource protection. The Coastal Commission, however, has stated that it will not approve new parking that requires payment or limits hours of use, as discussed further below; and 2) Caltrans' position is that it does not implement parking projects even though its right of way hosts one formal and multiple informal parking lots, some with hazardous ingress and egress.

The NCFMP moves us part of the way towards understanding how multiple landowners and conflicting policies hamper problem-solving but seems to have tip-toed where it should have walked more boldly towards encouraging agencies to address these policy conflicts. DNCA will continue to lobby our political leaders to find creative solutions to these inter-agency roadblocks.

- **The Coastal Commission** staff's opposition to limits on hours of use for beach parking and to paid parking merit particular focus in the North Coast context. The hours of operation issue arose in conjunction with Rail Trail consistency determination by the Coastal Commission at a hearing in December 2021. RTC proposed hours of operation for the new parking lots that would generally reflect posted hours for use of the beaches and bluffs that those parking lots will provide access to, *i.e.* daylight and early evening, as well as existing posting for parking on and adjacent to the highway. Coastal Commission staff recommended, and the Commission by a one-vote margin approved, a condition that the parking lots be open for parking day and night. The Commission took this action over the united objection of local law enforcement, Santa Cruz County, elected officials, environmental scientists, and numerous local stakeholders.

The Commission's stance on parking (hours and revenue) presents an enormous obstacle to development of a safe and environmentally sound management regime for the North Coast. It is important that the NCFMP not accept this outcome as final.

- **Toilets and Sanitation.** A more programmatic approach to the question of sanitation and toilets would be helpful. At what number of parking spaces (formal or informal) is a toilet warranted? What spacing is appropriate – will the toilet at the Davenport Rail Trail parking lot meet the needs of visitors to Davenport Beach a quarter mile south, for example? If a toilet is assumed to be available to meet the needs of visitors en route to a site without a toilet, does it need a few dedicated short-term parking spaces?

We might draw insights from how this question has been answered on the San Mateo coast, where all parking areas accommodating more than a handful of cars have toilets. Are there formal planning guidelines for toilets established by State Parks or other recreation planners, based on parking spaces or visitor use counts? What distinguishes the need for the planned toilet at the 4 Mile parking area from the implied lack of justification for a toilet at the Bonny Doon Beach parking area, for example? (The need for toilets at expanded Scott Creek Beach parking areas seems obvious; the reason why sea level rise might make this problematic is not apparent to us. If north and south parking lots can be built and maintained, why not toilets as components of what is likely to be a half-billion-dollar project?)

Finally, if recreation standards and health and safety concerns indicate that toilets at a given site are warranted, why not consider the interim provision of portable toilets at those sites?

- **Lack of safe access at most popular beaches.** Shark Fin Beach safety issues were added to the report late in the process due to concerns expressed by stakeholders. A deeper dive into the nature and dynamics of the problem at Shark Fin would provide useful insights. Shark Fin is a tiny beach – about the size of a couple of basketball courts at low tide and a pickleball court (if that much) at high tide. The approach to the beach from the tracks above is among the most hazardous on the north coast – an initial climb or slide down a near-vertical stretch of slippery hardened dirt transitioning to a 45-degree section of loose dirt and rock. Many people or groups arrive at Shark Fin intending to access the beach but end up opting not to. Many more come only to take photos from the rail embankment of the iconic Shark Fin Rock. Some venture onto the bluff trails but most users go no more than a few hundred yards out in either direction, perhaps unaware that they are on loop trails that would return them to the parking area if they continued. One implication of this use pattern is that parking turnover is more frequent than at other sites, creating more movements of ingress and egress from the highway.

Shark Fin Beach is not the only beach with access challenges. Davenport Beach, Yellow Bank, Bonny Doon, and others present similar problems.

Swing Beach (at high tide no “beach” at all) represents the extreme case. The “swing” (regularly removed by emergency first-responders but regularly replaced by visitors) is attached to the remnant of an old pier at the base of a cliff descended only with the aid of a user-installed rope. Although most visitors opt not to make the descent, accidents are frequent. In the interest of public safety and emergency response cost savings, the Swing Beach descent should be blocked at the bluff top and posted for no access, improvements that would cost relatively little to make and yield significant savings.

- **Davenport Landing Beach** and its problems warrant attention in the plan. It is the only beach with access at grade and a ramped approach to the beach, a bathroom, a dumpster emptied twice a week, and substantial parking capacity off-highway. It is a major regional attractant for surfing, wind surfing, and beach use. Heavy use has caused serious impacts to inter-tidal resources, and there is no signage to help harvesters understand their rights and restrictions.

Peak use regularly exceeds parking capacity at Davenport Landing. It is not unusual for there to be over 120 cars, resulting in parking patterns that obstruct vehicular access for first responders. It also gets a substantial amount of night-time use, after the posted no-parking time of 10pm. When the improvements (toilet and ramp) were made at Davenport Landing, the plan included striping and signage for parking that would preserve adequate access for emergency vehicles, including making the road one-way north of the bathroom with parallel parking on the inland side. Adding signage, revisiting

the planned site improvements, and completing them would be a simple, low-cost fix to some of the problems at Davenport Landing.

- **The role of social media.** Shark Fin Beach (also known as Shark’s Tooth) is an example of “selfie tourism,” like Swing Beach to the north (at the crossing of the highway by the railway tracks). Early in the stakeholder process the consultants explored with stakeholders questions about the role and opportunity of social media in informing and improving visitor choices about visiting the North Coast, but unfortunately these ideas appear not to have been developed and included in the final draft. Shark Fin and Swing Beach present interesting case studies for further exploring the potential of social media.

Shark Fin Rock was selected as the primary photo for use in publications and promotional materials related to the National Monument and as a result has been and continues to be heavily used on web sites, in magazine and newspaper articles, and in official and quasi-official guides. In its description of the North Coast, for example, Visit Santa Cruz County leads with a photo of Shark Fin Rock and alludes to “Shark Fin Cove: a photographer’s dream and beachgoer’s paradise.” A separate sub-page on that site, splashed “BEYOND YOUR WILDEST DREAMS – SHARK FIN COVE,” includes the fact that there is no toilet nearby and no trash receptacles on the beach itself, but neglects to mention the hazardous, non-family-friendly access. It promotes night-time use and “astral photography” while failing to disclose that State Parks’ policies, stated in signage at the site, prohibit night-time use. It doesn’t mention high tide and wave hazards.

This heavy digital presence for Shark Fin has led to a self-amplifying social media cycle wherein Shark Fin is equated with the North Coast beaches, and a selfie with Shark Fin Rock is like a stamped passport marking visitation.

Similarly, Swing Beach has been used in tourist promotion by the Chamber of Commerce and others and features heavily in the North Coast’s social media image.

Early NCFMP discussions about social media acknowledged the impossibility and inappropriateness of trying to control or limit social media content, but recognized the potential for establishing social media channels that would better inform visitor choices. At a minimum, when the information is packaged and disseminated by public agencies or non-governmental associations, there may be opportunities for asking that this be done more responsibly, with a focus on safety, accuracy, and usefulness, and in coordination with the NCFMP agency group.

- **Divergent priorities for projects that are related physically, financially, and functionally.** The NCFMP should recognize a need to make maximum effort to move projects forward in parallel when they have connections to one another physically, functionally, and financially.

The treatment of Panther/Yellowbank/Monument southern trails access and infrastructure is one example of this differential treatment. The plan shows a wide range of priority

levels and expected completion dates for these projects – a treatment that misses fundamental interconnections. For example, the pedestrian/bicycle bridge over Highway 1 (Status: underway/imminent; High Priority: “yes”) connects to the BLM parking lot (Status: “potential”; High Priority: “no”) which serves both users of the BLM trails (Status: “Planned – 10 years” and “Planned – 5 years”, the federal lands access that justified federal funding of the pedestrian/bicycle bridge) and of Yellowbank/Panther Beach (Access Improvements: “Planned – 5 years”; High Priority: “yes”) who will need a toilet (Status: “Potential”; High Priority: “no”). This cluster of projects, including the new Rail Trail parking lot, will induce additional Highway 1 traffic and on- and off-highway turning movements, creating a need for turning pockets and associated improvements (Status: “Planned – 20 years”; High Priority: “no”).

There is a connection as well to Zone 4 traffic and pedestrian safety issues since a key premise of the Monument’s Resource Management Plan is that simultaneous provision of both north and south parking and opening of trails north and south is essential to avoiding or reducing resource impacts in the northern section of the Monument and safety impacts to the residents of New Town and Davenport. Although BLM seems to have de-prioritized the southern entrance, there are compelling reasons for the NCFMP not to mirror that de-prioritization.

There are similar issues in the treatment of the northern parking lot. Northern Trailhead Parking (high priority/under construction) will create traffic and pedestrian safety issues on Cement Plant Road (CPR) that would be mitigated by an off-street path (“potential”) and further exacerbate hazards at the CPR/Davenport Landing Road/Highway intersection, which, given its use volume and accident history, should have received left turn pocket lanes long ago (not in the plan at all).

- **Ongoing quarterly meetings.** The most important “next step” identified in the plan is the continuation of the working group of land owners and major stakeholders. We endorse the plan’s prescription for quarterly meetings, with those meetings convened and coordinated by County Parks. We suggest that County Parks be tasked with doing this in tandem with the Santa Cruz County District 3 Supervisor’s Office to directly engage a key elected official, and because of the unique connections that office has with law enforcement, State, and Federal agencies. We urge that these meetings either be public or that there be a clearly identified mechanism for getting public concerns, questions, and suggestions onto the agenda and a reporting-out mechanism so that interested members of the public know what was discussed and agreed upon.
- **Public engagement.** We are submitting this letter with the understanding that County staff have set a December 18 deadline for comment. There have been challenges associated with **public engagement** in this process. The early decision to restrict stakeholders from sharing meeting materials with interested citizens and non-represented organizations foreclosed early input and perspectives from highly knowledgeable individuals. It also created some suspicion about the process, as was apparent in the Davenport public meeting. The current drafts are not easily accessed on the County web site. Most people reporting to us have been unable to use the prioritization tool due to


computer compatibility issues. Given all those challenges, and competition for attention during the holiday season, we urge you to address these technical problems and provide an additional 30 days for review and comment.

The NCFMP brings important value and adds a useful set of analytical tools to a complex and serious set of issues. DNCA would like to join with you in making every effort to make it a living, evolving document of relevance to agency decision-making and investments as we move forward. We appreciate your including these comments in the record of the NCFMP process.

Sincerely,



Katie Webb, Board Chair



Noel Bock, Immediate Past Chair



Mike Eaton, Board Member

Cc: Justin Cummings, Santa Cruz County Supervisor, District 3
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Zachary Ormsby, BLM Central Coast Field Manager
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