



SIERRA CLUB MARIN GROUP

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GGNRA: Attn Steve Griswold / CA Dept of Parks and Recreation Attn: Patricia DuMont
Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy Attn: Greg Moore
Fort Mason Bld 201, SF, CA 94123

Re: Conversion of Diaz Ridge Fire Road to a Multiuse Trail

The Sierra Club supports this conversion in concept, however, we have a number of concerns and comments that we believe must be addressed:

“Trails Forever”

Many of the Parks' existing fire roads are 10-12 feet wide and were in-sloped or constructed along relatively flat terrain, which create major erosion problems. These roads were constructed for the convenience of the builder and/or user but require frequent and increasingly intensive maintenance to reverse the impacts of erosion. By modern standards of rural road construction and environmental protection, they are poorly designed. In many cases, such as Diaz Ridge Trail, the lack of maintenance funding has resulted in these roads essentially being abandoned by the Park. A well-designed out-sloped rural road or multiuse trail should last much longer without the periodic need to fund major maintenance. Consequently, these new multi-use trails are often described as lowering the Park's maintenance costs, when in fact, the base of comparison in many cases is an unrealistic zero. Furthermore, while costs for major periodic maintenance is decreased, costs for minor regular maintenance is increased.

Even if a new trail could be designed so perfectly that no erosion maintenance would ever be required, multiuse trails that are narrower than the 10-12-foot-wide fire roads they replace incur a different kind of maintenance need. Because these are multiuse trails, they must allow for safe and simultaneous passage of bikers, horses and hikers. A 10-12-foot-wide fire road has enough safety margin for a few potholes or some vegetation incursion while still maintaining a width wide enough for safe passage. When these same problems arise on a 5-6-foot-wide multiuse trail, there may be no safety margin for a user to step off trail. Unless maintenance is readily and quickly available to fix these minor spot problems, the resulting unsatisfactory or dangerous trail experience on just a few feet of trail can effectively drive hikers and equestrians away from using the entire trail and turn an intended multiuse trail into a de-facto bike-only trail. Our Sierra Club hike leaders report exactly this situation on the Coast View Fire Road. It is our understanding that the current problems on the Coastal View Trail are a result inadequate trail design heavy bike use, and lack of maintenance. A trail is not multi-use when it is less than 60" wide, rutted, and carved by bike tires into a "V" cross-section that makes walking uncomfortable and moving out of the way difficult. It is clear that the addition of a Diaz Ridge connection will only increase these problems. Thus we would insist that prior to the conversion of Diaz Ridge, all the problems on Coastal View should be fixed and measures identified to maintain the Coastal View Trail properly, permanently and in accord with the TCC settlement.

“Trails Forever” (continued)

Luckily, there may should a solution that satisfies all user groups. We understand that some/all of the funding for Diaz Ridge is being provided by the Golden Gate National Parks Conservancy “Trails Forever” Initiative. Since we presume that the Conservancy is soliciting funds from donors for its “Trails Forever” Initiative, then we also must presume that the use of the word “forever” mandates that donations received must be treated as “endowments” under California Law. In short, an endowment must be managed by the receiving nonprofit (the Conservancy) in such a way that the principal remains intact and only the earnings are used for the programmatic work. That programmatic work must include not only the construction but also the maintenance of “Trails Forever.” Consequently, we request a clearer understanding both the legal structure and allocation formula by which the Trails Forever Initiative will guarantee maintenance funding such that that when one of our Sierra Club hike leaders calls to report a problem with the new Diaz Ridge multiuse Trail (or any trail funded by “Trails Forever”, then there will an appropriate response to resolve the problem.

Question: did “Trails Forever” fund the Coastal View Trail? If so, then please demonstrate the funding dedicated to maintenance of this trail and why it has not been tapped to resolve the problems on Coastal View.

Parking

The Sierra Club is very concerned that the current large amount of informal shoulder parking on Panoramic between Four Corners and Highway 1 has the potential to create a major congestion problem similar to that at China Camp. Diaz Ridge cannot be looked at in isolation, and the Sierra Club would support this Trail only as part of a seamless connection to bike trails in the City-Centered corridor. Seamless means eliminating interim auto staging areas with physical barriers (i.e., those not requiring enforcement); for example, barriers on Panoramic would designate a safe and legal bus stop, while controlling and severely limiting shoulder parking. Access to this upper Diaz Ridge trailhead should be via other connecting bike routes or via a bike-carrying bus stopping at the trailhead.

Width

The Tamalpais Conservation Club (TCC) settlement with State Parks (which the Sierra Club contributed to) called for a minimum (not average) 60” wide multiuse trail. However, we believe that the Diaz Ridge Trail should not be designed to achieve the minimum, but rather should be deigned a 1-3 feet wider and then reduced to the minimum 60” width when constrained by environmental factors. It is our understanding that typical bike trail building equipment creates trails 48” wide and that segments of the coastal trail (the subject of the TCC settlement) are less than 60” wide despite the settlement. Please describe the equipment and techniques that will insure that the Diaz Ridge conversion maintains this 60” minimum width. Please describe the frequency of the environmental circumstances along the proposed Trail route under which the 60” minimum width would be dictated.

Loops

The proposed conversion of Diaz Ridge Fire Road to a Multiuse Trail was stated at the Dec. 8 public meeting to be a project that would not entail any change of use designation. However, both maps provided at the public meeting clearly show through-connection changes from bike access on State Park land to hiking and horses only at the border with GGNRA. The bike-accessible Diaz Ridge Trail dead-ends and does not connect through. We are not clear whether the maps offered at the public meeting are incorrect or the statement. Please clarify. Regardless, my personal experience is that a change in use "designation" or change in intensity of an allowed use can alter the pattern of users. I regularly hiked Middle Green Gulch every spring for its wildflowers and birdsongs when it was hikers only. This former ranch road is steep, in a narrow canyon, and slides have converted long stretches to single track. For these reasons, when it was later converted to multiuse designation, it was for uphill bikes only. Disregarding the downhill scofflaws, even legal uphill bike use made my subsequent use impossible. Wildflower study often entails extended periods of close observation that on a narrow trail were continually interrupted by having to get up and out of the way of passing bikes. On the portion of the trail that slides had made single-track, there was no place to move other than by stepping into and onto the very wildflowers that had been the subject of my study. Last, the birdsong was continually interrupted by the voices of bikers talking over their equipment and focused in the narrow canyon. I have never gone back.

I believe that most hikers are willing to share trails of appropriate design and width with other users, but not every trail. In the case of Diaz Ridge, whether or not there is a change of designation, there will be a change in intensity when the trail is re-routed and re-designed to become a functional multi-use connector to a multi-use trail system. Safety aside, the esthetics of a gently curving smooth gradient multi-use path designed for tires are not as appealing to hikers as are those more challenging paths intended for feet. The noise of equipment passing and voices raised over equipment noise makes multi-use trails less appealing to hikers. More active, speedier and noisier recreation drives out more passive, slower and quieter recreation. We need to make sure that our parklands maintain a balance so that there always remain quiet places. We also need to provide useful and enjoyable bike connections.

If the maps are correct, then in the current arrangement precedent to this project, bikers have a loop with one inbound trail (Coyote Ridge) and two outbound trails (Coyote Ridge and uphill-only Middle Green Gulch). Hikers have no loop, with only one inbound and the same outbound trail (Green Gulch). If the statements about no change in designation are correct, then hikers remain with no loop but bikers have multiple loop choices with two inbound trails (Diaz Ridge and Coyote Ridge) and three outbound trails (Coyote Ridge, green Gulch, and uphill-only Middle Green Gulch), although the Diaz Ridge trail is poorly designed and routed for bikes. Regardless of whether the map or the statement is correct, we believe the proposed improvement of the Diaz Ridge Trail will, we hope, make it more useable by bikers, but that will have the side effect of making it less used by hikers. We believe an easy mitigation for hikers is possible so that both bikers and hikers have full two-way loop trails for Muir Beach access. Thus, we proposed that the Diaz Ridge project include a reversion to hiker&horses on what is now the multi-use uphill-only middle Green Gulch Trail, which by no stretch of the imagination meets any of the safety criteria for multi-use even if it is multi-use uphill only.

Connections

We are very concerned that the proposed re-routing of Diaz Ridge to exit at Muir Beach does not satisfy the Project's objective of "Safe Multi-use trails of SR1" because it still requires both SR1 and Frank Valley road to connect to the re-routed heather trail. Furthermore, we are concerned that this lack of connection could lead to pressure for the currently hiker and horse-only Redwood Creek trail to be converted to multiuse to make the connection. We are already concerned about the impacts to endangered salmon from current use of this trail that parallels Redwood Creek and may impact salmon spawning areas. We therefore urge that this project investigate a new configuration that would continue the Coastal View trail high and adjacent to but off SR1. This trail would then drop down through Banducci's and pick up the farm road, then cross Redwood Creek and connect through near the intersection of SR 1 and Frank Valley Road. On the Diaz Ridge side, we urge that there be a multiuse trail connection between the horse stables at the former Golden Gate Dairy and the same intersection of SR 1 and Frank Valley Road, where the horses could connect to the Redwood Creek Trail and the bikers to the rerouted Coastal View Trail. Getting horses off that stretch of SR 1 is every bit as important as getting bikes off SR 1.

Monitoring

Our support would also be conditional on monitoring the traffic and congestion impacts of the Diaz Ridge Multiuse Trail. The claim that off-road bike access to Muir could reduce auto traffic on Highway 1 is a hopeful goal, but it is also possible that an increase in bike traffic would not translate into a decrease in auto traffic due to the steepness (average 10% grade) of the Trail. Such steepness could encourage auto trips to trailhead parking on Panoramic for a once-down and once-up ride rather than parking along the city-centered Greenway and biking up and down twice to get to Muir Beach. Affecting traffic on Highway 1 and parking at Muir Beach even more would be encouraging of a one-way downhill ride accessed by a double car drop. Monitoring should insure that the Diaz Ridge Multiuse Trail does not increase either Highway 1 traffic or Panoramic/Muir Beach parking congestion.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.

Gordon Bennett,

Marin Group Chair
SF Bay Chapter Executive Committee