

PRIORITY CONSERVATION AREA APPLICATION

Benefits

Community Health and Recreation

The Hillside Natural Area is 102.5-acres of undeveloped open space with more than 5 miles of trails and nine entrances from surrounding residential neighborhoods. Residents of El Cerrito and neighboring communities have easy access to the HNA's stairs, paths and open recreation areas, where they enjoy many opportunities to walk, ride bikes, and play outdoors. The HNA includes a range of natural settings from quiet forests and oak groves with creeks and native vegetation to open views of the San Francisco Bay that provide places to enjoy the outdoors, fighting "nature deficit disorder" and contributing to good mental health.

The HNA's trails are rare in urban environments and provide important, off-street linkages between the Bay Trail and Wildcat Canyon Regional Park, providing regional active recreation and nature observation opportunities. Local advocacy and community groups, including the Berkeley Path Wanderers, El Cerrito Trail Trekkers, and Friends of Five Creeks, lead regular hikes through the HNA. The City recently purchased an 8-acre parcel, the Madera Property, to close the gap between otherwise separate north and south portions of the Natural Area. The property provides important public trail linkages to surrounding neighborhoods, including a natural Safe Route to School to the adjacent Madera Elementary School.

Local, volunteer-run stewardship organizations Friends of Five Creeks, the El Cerrito Trail Trekkers, the Madera Stewards and the City's Environmental Quality Green Teams host regular volunteer events throughout the HNA. These events draw large numbers of volunteers, including students at three neighboring schools, who help remove invasive species, plant native species, and build and maintain trails, which builds community and contributes to a sense of local investment. These organizations incorporate outdoor education into their events, providing local children with a healthy set of skills to help learn from their environment. The City hosts an annual Hillside Festival with hikes, clean-up events, and stewardship activities to raise money for various HNA projects; the event draws over 100 people.

Resilience

The Hillside Natural Area includes the majority of El Cerrito's urban tree canopy. Both its forests and its deep-rooted native grasses are important to the city's ability to store carbon, reduce the urban heat island effect and provide permeable surface to slow and sink stormwater. The City recently completed an inventory of green infrastructure and permeable surfaces to demonstrate whether or not 35% of the jurisdiction's land area had protected vegetated surfaces performing a minimum of three of the following functions: 1) localized cooling through tree canopy cover, green roofs, or green walls; 2) water management through wetlands, stream buffers, and permeable surfaces; and, 3) recreation through parks and/or greenways. The inventory found that the HNA was the single largest contributor to all three environmental functions.

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The HNA contains creek tributaries which flow into Baxter Creek and the unnamed creek informally called *Fluvius Innominatus*. The riparian corridors along these creek segments present important watershed quality benefits by filtering stormwater, reinforcing creek banks with appropriate vegetation, and habitat for wildlife. The presence of the HNA helps reduce flood risk and erosion by providing a large area of permeable, natural conditions.

In addition, the recreational benefits provided by the large, easily accessed and attractive HNA helps curb emissions by reducing local residents' need to drive significant distances to walk dogs, hike, ride trail bikes, take in magnificent views, and simply enjoy the peace and restoration of wild nature. The HNA provides trails not only for recreation, but also for circulation, connecting to sidewalks that connect residential neighborhoods, business districts, school and public spaces.

Wildlife Habitat

The HNA includes portions of four small creeks, as well as a remarkably diverse mosaic of grassland, chaparral, and forest, surprisingly reminiscent of the landscape before urban settlement. Oak forests in the canyons have rich and varied understories of fern, native wild currant, blackberry, snowberry, honeysuckle, and yerba buena, typical of pre-settlement times. Grasslands on the ridges support both native grasses and a wide variety of wildflowers; the chaparral is fragrant with sage and bright with sticky monkeyflower. Two small willow groves retain this habitat type, rare today in cities. Friends of Five Creeks have identified and mapped more than 125 native plant species throughout the Hillside.

Animal wildlife includes 10 species of mammals (including coyotes, foxes, deer, dusky-footed woodrats, squirrels, pocket gophers, skunks and raccoons), 52 species of birds (including hawks, owls and songbirds), 6 species of amphibians (alligator and Western fence lizards), and a wide variety of bees, butterflies and other insects. The geology of the Hillside Natural Area is varied, ranging from an old rock quarry to remnants of lava flows that have travelled on earthquake faults.

Water Supply and Quality

Naturalized creek segments run through the Hillside Natural Area representing a significant portion of the upstream waters of Baxter Creek and *Fluvius Innominatus*. Located predominantly in heavily vegetated, inaccessible portions of the HNA, these creek segments mainly maintain their natural vegetation and creek banks. A creek inventory completed in 2007 found minimal sediment buildup and erosion due to the significant natural vegetation in the area. Some segments of both creeks, however, remain in concrete channels and culverts with the HNA that have fallen into disrepair; if flood risks return to the area, these segments may have significant impacts on water quality in the area. Downstream, both creeks are prone to sediment buildup and erosion, particularly in the culverted channels downstream. Maintenance of these naturalized channels will help maintain the creek's overall health and reduce maintenance costs to the City.