



## STAFF REPORT

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**TO:** Parks and Recreation Committee      **DATE:** January 23, 2026

**DEPARTMENT:** Public Works

**PREPARED BY:** Chantell O'Neal, Assistant Director Engineering

**PRESENTER:** Chantell O'Neal, Assistant Director Engineering

**AGENDA TITLE:** Request for Committee Direction on Recreational Features for the Reservoir and Community Forest Project

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### RECOMMENDATION

Staff recommends that the Parks and Recreation Committee review the information provided and give direction on which recreational features should be included in the programmatic environmental analysis for the Reservoir and Community Forest Project Environmental Impact Report (EIR). This direction is necessary for Rincon Consultants to complete the Project Description and proceed with the Draft EIR.

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### BACKGROUND

The City purchased the 582-acre property southeast of Fort Bragg in 2023 to support long-term water supply reliability and to establish a publicly accessible community forest. The site was historically owned by timber companies and used primarily for logging. Over the years, several concepts were proposed—including a golf course (with an EIR completed in 2005 but never adopted) and an OHV park in 2018—but none advanced. The property also has a history of trespass, dumping, and informal trail creation.

The City is now moving forward with the **Water Storage Reservoirs and Community Forest Project**, which includes construction of three 45-acre-foot raw water reservoirs, associated pipelines, caretaker unit(s), a trailhead and parking area, and development of a community forest. The project is intended to improve drought resilience by storing water in winter when flows are high and drawing from the reservoirs in summer, reducing impacts on aquatic species.

Rincon Consultants was selected through the City's RFP process to prepare the EIR. Mendocino Land Trust (MLT) is assisting the City with community forest planning and conservation easement considerations. WaterWorks Engineers is designing the reservoir improvements.

A **Notice of Preparation (NOP)** was circulated on September 10, 2025, and two public scoping meetings were held on September 16, 2025. In advance of the NOP workshop, the City conducted an online survey from **June 1–24, 2025** to get community input on potential recreational features, **323 responses** were received.

The purpose of this report is to present the Committee with the site constraints, survey themes, and project context so the Committee can identify which recreational features should be analyzed at a programmatic level in the EIR.

## **DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS**

### **History and Site Conditions**

Key historical and environmental facts from the NOP and scoping materials include:

- The property consists of **six City-owned parcels totaling 582 acres**.
- The site contains **rare and sensitive Mendocino Cypress Woodland (pygmy forest)**, mapped by CDFW and confirmed through updated surveys in 2023.
- An inventory of the property identified existing dirt roads, informal trails, invasive species, dumping areas, and areas of erosion.
- Prior uses included logging, a former residence (burned), and various informal recreation activities.
- The City intends to annex the property into City limits.
- The reservoir footprint is approximately **26.2 acres**, located north of an existing dirt road and south of the PG&E transmission line.
- The conceptual site plan intentionally places new facilities in **already disturbed areas** to minimize impacts.

These conditions strongly influence what types of recreational features may be feasible.

### **Potential Recreational Features**

#### **I. Environmental Constraints**

The scoping presentation and NOP emphasize several key limitations to future development:

- The Mendocino Cypress Woodland is **imperiled** and subject to special protection.

- Decommissioning social trails and informal access points is recommended to reduce ongoing habitat damage.
- Future public trails should be located **only in already disturbed areas** to avoid new impacts.
- The City's **primary goal** is successful construction and operation of the reservoirs; recreational features must not compromise this objective.

## II. Survey Themes (High-Level Summary)

The 323 survey responses reflected a wide range of interests. At a high level:

- **Strong support** for passive recreation such as hiking trails, walking paths, benches, interpretive signage, and nature-based educational elements.
- **Interest** in ADA-accessible trails and small gathering or picnic areas.
- **Mixed support** for more intensive features such as playgrounds, sport courts, athletic fields, and event spaces.
- **Divergent opinions** on uses such as biking facilities, pump tracks, equestrian access, and motorized recreation.
- **Concerns** raised about protecting habitat, noise, wildfire risk, misuse, and maintaining a tranquil environment.

Features that can be accommodated within disturbed areas—and that do not require significant grading or vegetation removal—are likely to be the most feasible. However, the most intensive use that is likely desired by the City should be evaluated in the EIR.

## III. Committee Direction Needed

Rincon has advised that for a **programmatic EIR**, the City may provide:

- A list of potential recreational options, **or**
- General categories of recreational uses.

More detail allows for a more robust analysis, but the EIR can remain flexible. The Committee's direction will determine which features are included in the Project Description.

### Naming the Park/Site

The survey included an open-ended question about naming the new park. Responses included:

- Nature-based names referencing the pygmy forest or cypress woodland
- Names referencing the Noyo River
- Suggestions to collaborate with local Tribes or use Pomo language
- A variety of creative community-generated names

Staff recommends a **public naming process** that may include soliciting suggestions, developing themes, and returning to the Committee or full Council with a shortlist.

### **Funding Considerations**

Public input and a published CEQA document that includes recreational concepts can strengthen the City's competitiveness for future grant opportunities. Many state and federal programs prioritize:

- Community-driven planning
- Nature-based recreation
- Habitat protection
- Outdoor access equity

Having a clear, publicly supported vision for recreation at the site will support future funding applications.

### **Look-Ahead Schedule**

The schedule presented at the September 16, 2025, scoping meeting included:

- **Draft EIR / Public Hearing:** February 2026
- **Final EIR / City Council Approval:** July 2026
- **Final Engineering Design:** July 2026
- **Construction Contract Award:** October 2026
- **Start Construction:** Spring 2027

Because the Draft EIR cannot proceed until the Committee provides direction on recreational features, these dates will shift. Based on current milestones and progress, it is likely that 2+ months should be added to each date listed above.

## **Programmatic EIR**

A programmatic EIR evaluates recreational uses at a **broad, conceptual level**. If the City later modifies or replaces specific features, the EIR can still be used **as long as the changes fall within the general types of uses analyzed**. If the City changes its mind later about recreational features, we would need to complete a CEQA consistency review to determine whether:

- ☐ No further CEQA action is needed,
- ☐ An **Addendum** is appropriate, or
- ☐ A supplemental CEQA document is required.

Based on site constraints:

### **Low Impact Features:**

- Trails (hiking, walking, ADA)
- Interpretive elements
- Small picnic areas
- Educational spaces
- Limited non-motorized biking
- Equestrian access (if confined to disturbed areas)

### **Higher Impact Features:**

- Sports fields
- Large event venues
- Playgrounds (if clearing is required)
- Motorized recreation
- Any feature requiring new disturbance in pygmy forest habitat

## **FISCAL IMPACT/FUNDING SOURCE**

Providing direction on recreational features has **no direct fiscal impact**. However, Committee may want to give direction on the most intensive use likely for consideration on this site, such that it is evaluated within the original EIR, as new high impact features evaluated at a later phase trigger supplemental EIRs which are considerably more expensive than a consistency evaluation or EIR Addendum. Costs associated with the current EIR are already included in the consultant contract awarded through the RFP process (August 2024).

**ATTACHMENTS:**

1. Survey Questions
2. Survey Results
3. Mendocino Land Trust Maps and Analysis

**NOTIFICATION:**

1. MLT
2. Rincon