



CITY COUNCIL STAFF REPORT

TO:	City Council	DATE: August 25, 2025
DEPARTMENT:	Community Development	
PREPARED BY:	Sarah Peters, Assistant Planner	
PRESENTER:	Sarah Peters, Assistant Planner	
AGENDA TITLE:	Receive Report and Provide Direction Regarding Installation of Scenic Tower Viewer Binoculars on the Fort Bragg Coastal Trail	

BACKGROUND

At the March 3, 2025, Community Development Committee (CDC) meeting, members expressed interest in the possibility of installing binoculars on the Coastal Trail, and directed staff to include Binoculars as a subject for one of two Blue Zones Demonstration Projects that Blue Zones had allocated to the City of Fort Bragg. A Blue Zones Demonstration Project is a semi-permanent change to the physical infrastructure to prove a concept or need. It is a short-term project, typically research, that feeds into something permanent. The direction was that a demonstration project be done, similar to a pop-up event out on the Coastal Trail, that would allow users to use temporarily provided binoculars for viewing birds and the scenery out at the North Coastal Trail near Glass Beach, and to take a survey. Depending on the response and feedback obtained from this event, the binocular project could be considered for prioritization as a Marquee project, which is a permanent change to the built environment that encourages active transportation and living and that applies best practices for creating vibrant, livable communities and engaging people in collectively reimagining public spaces.

The Demonstration Project was held in coordination with the City of Fort Bragg, Blue Zones and Audubon, during the March 15 Whale Run, and the survey was launched.

Staff took both the fitness equipment and binocular projects to the City Council on June 9, 2025. At that meeting, Council directed staff to coordinate with Blue Zones Project Mendocino Coast to determine if the binocular project could become a Marquee project, and if so, to bring it back in more detail for Council consideration.

DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

Scenic tower viewer binoculars are often found at tourist destinations. Typically, the binoculars swivel side to side and are mounted on solid pedestal that keeps the view steady, unlike hand-held binoculars that can be difficult to hold still. Often the pedestal base will have steps to ease access for children and shorter adults. The purpose of these binoculars is to provide a more immersive and engaging way to enjoy the landscape by allowing users to see boats, birds, sea-life and other scenery more clearly and in greater detail than they

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otherwise could. They can be used as an educational tool as well, as well as contribute to a positive recreational experience for visitors.

Regulatory Issues

A Coastal Development Permit (CDP) is required for any development in the coastal zone. Development means:

On land, in or under water, the placement or erection of any solid material or structure; discharge or disposal of any dredged material or of any gaseous, liquid, solid, or thermal waste; grading, removing, dredging, mining, or extraction of any materials; change in the density or intensity of use of land, including, but not limited to, subdivision pursuant to the subdivision map act (commencing with Government Code Section [66410](#)), and any other division of land except where the land division is brought about in connection with the purchase of such land by a public agency for public recreational use; change in the intensity of use of water, or of access thereto; construction, reconstruction, demolition, or alteration of the size of any structure, including any facility of any private, public, or municipal utility; and the removal or harvesting of major vegetation other than for agricultural purposes, kelp harvesting, and timber operations in accordance with a timber harvesting plan submitted pursuant to the provisions of the Z'berg Nejedly Forest Practice Act of 1973 (commencing with Public Resources Code Section [4511](#)).

Installation of binoculars falls within this definition. The CDP staff report would analyze coastal resources, such as visual, biological, and cultural resources.

Magnification, Locations, Maintenance, and Other Considerations

Magnification. These viewers commonly come with 10X or 20X magnification. 10X magnification allows objects to appear ten times closer than they appear to the naked eye. For example, a bird 300 feet away would appear as if it were only 30 feet away. The maximum distance will depend on factors like atmospheric conditions and the size of the object. Clear skies and good visibility will allow you to see farther than in hazy or foggy conditions. Higher quality binoculars with better lenses and coatings will provide a clearer image, allowing for better visibility over longer distances. Magnification also means a narrower field of view, which can make it harder to find and track moving objects.

The images below demonstrate the difference between the naked eye and 10X, 20X and 35X magnification.



Coin Operated vs. Non-Coin Operated Viewers. Most of the companies that sell or lease these viewers offer both coin operated or non-coin operated. Advantages and disadvantages of coin-operated are listed below.

Advantages	Disadvantages
Cost is minimal (1-2 quarters) for a set viewing time, thus accessible to a wide range of visitors.	Many people no longer carry quarters in their pockets.
Inserting a coin adds an interactive element to the sightseeing experience.	Malfunctions of the coin mechanism could block use and cause frustration.
Paid viewing times are roughly 1.5-2.5 minutes, which could limit viewers from monopolizing the binoculars for long periods of time.	Limitations on quarter storage would require timely collection to prevent the viewer from becoming full. The range is approximately 700-2,000 quarters.
Could provide a source of income for the location, as visitors pay to use them.	Reduced access and usage by trail visitors.

Weatherproofing and Durability. The marine environment with its high degree of moisture and salt air is very hard on materials. The viewers we have looked at claim to be very weather resistant to the coastal climates in which they are frequently found. Manufacturers often use materials like stainless steel and incorporate features to withstand weather, humidity, and vandalism. Many models are designed to be waterproof and resistant to fogging, often with nitrogen-filled optics.

Factors affecting durability include –

- **Frequency of Use:** While designed for public use, extremely high usage might necessitate more frequent maintenance or replacement parts over time.
- **Exposure to Extreme Conditions:** Prolonged exposure to very harsh environments, such as constant salt spray or exceptionally high humidity, might accelerate wear and tear, even with protective designs. Our salt spray environment is classed in this category.
- **Maintenance and Servicing:** Proper care, including regular cleaning and attention to potential issues like stiff focusing or seal deterioration, can significantly prolong the lifespan of the binoculars.

Maintenance. There will be some on-going maintenance. Depending on the machine type, examples include:

- Application of lubricant on a monthly basis.
- Routine cleansing of lenses.
- Touch-up paint as needed to cover any nicks or scratches on powder-coated surfaces.

- Polishing the viewer heads on which the finish may dull over time.
- Coin collection.

Age Restrictions. Most scenic tower viewers do not have specific age restrictions; however, the following considerations may influence ease of use for children:

- **Height:** Young children might need assistance or a boost to reach the eyepieces comfortably.
- **Interpupillary Distance (IPD):** These viewers often have a fixed IPD, which might not be ideal for very young children whose eyes are closer together.
- **Understanding the mechanism:** Children may need help understanding how to operate coin-operated models.

Accessibility. There are accessible options available from all of the manufacturers researched by staff. Some fit the standard equipment with an ADA compliant wheelchair accessible base that allows anyone in a wheelchair or at wheelchair height to access the viewer. Another option offered by at least two manufacturers is a “Dual Viewer” which is a model that provides two viewing heads off of one post – one at standard height and one at wheelchair (ADA) height. Below are examples of the two types:

Wheelchair Accessible



Dual Viewer Model

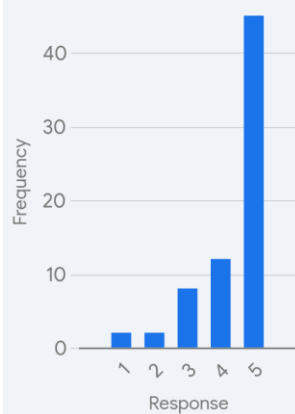


Utilization. Scenic viewer binoculars are popular at tourist destinations and are frequently found at scenic overlooks, observation decks, and other popular attractions to allow visitors to get a closer look at the surrounding landscape.

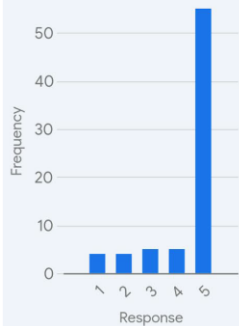
Survey.

A Demonstration Event was held on March 15, 2025, during the Whale Run event. It was coordinated by City staff, Blue Zones staff, and the local Audubon. A survey was conducted during that event and kept open online for one month. The results of the survey were mostly favorable to installation of binoculars along the trail. See graph below and full survey attached.

Distribution of Responses for "On a scale of 1-5, how much do you enjoy binocular viewing in this location?"



Distribution of Responses for "Do you believe permanently mounted binoculars would be a good addition to the Coast Headland Trail?"



Potential Locations. The maps below illustrate potential locations that may be suitable for installation of scenic viewer binoculars. The ideal location will already have concrete that the binocular base can be bolted to, which would streamline the process by not requiring new concrete pads to be poured.

South Coastal Trail Picnic Area, Near Parking Lot



South Coastal Trail Locations



South Coastal Trail Near the Crow's Nest



Otsuchi Point





FISCAL IMPACT/FUNDING SOURCE

Approximately \$22,500 - \$45,000 depending on chosen model/vendor and excluding site work, installation or permitting fees. This includes three stations with the accessible option. If bolting onto existing pads, installation could be done by Public Works staff. If the City needs to install pads, this would likely need to be contracted out, thereby increasing the cost. Shipping and Handling is factored in at a roughly estimated \$1,500 but could be more or less than that. Costs over and above \$35,000 could come from the General Fund. The manufacturers we are looking at include *SeeCoast Manufacturing Company, Inc.*, *Tower Optical Co., Inc.*, and *Hi-Spy Viewing Machines*.

Blue Zones Project (BZP) would contribute up to \$35,000. For approval, they would require a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with the City of Fort Bragg to ensure equipment maintenance after purchase. The MOU would include term/date details, costs, binocular details, City project planning approval, Blue Zones promotion requirements, i.e. donation plaque, etc. The city would need to be set up as a vendor with BZP to receive funds, unless Blue Zones purchases the equipment directly from the manufacturer.

BRANDING AND RECOGNITION

If the City of Fort Bragg accepts Blue Zones Project funding to purchase and install the mounted binoculars as considered in this report, the gift would be recognized by a donation plaque, powder-coated logo on the equipment, or something comparable as mutually agreed upon by the City of Fort Bragg staff and Blue Zones Project Mendocino County.

ENVIRONMENTAL ANALYSIS

The direction requested is covered by the 15061(b)(3) common sense exemption that CEQA applies only to projects which have the potential for causing a significant effect on the environment. Where it can be seen with certainty that there is no possibility that the activity in question may have a significant effect on the environment, the activity is not subject to CEQA. Direction from the Council does not commit the City to installation of the binoculars which is subject to a CDP. Environmental impacts would be analyzed in a Coastal Development Permit concurrent with the City committal to the installation.

TIMELINE

Blue Zones Program funding to be expended and equipment installed by the end of December.

STRATEGIC PLAN/COUNCIL PRIORITIES/GENERAL PLAN CONSISTENCY

General Plan Policy OS-17.3 Recreational Facilities: Provide recreational facilities to meet the needs of all Fort Bragg citizens, especially children and teenagers.

Strategic Goal 4: Enhance public spaces, promote recreation, and cultivate civic pride.

Strategic Goal 4E: Expand, improve, and repair parks, green spaces, and urban forests to encourage nature-immersed recreation.

COMMUNITY OUTREACH

- CDC discussion March 3 and June 2, 2025
- Coastal Trail Binocular Demonstration Event on March 15, 2025
- Coastal Trail Binocular Survey initiated March 15, 2025

COMMITTEE REVIEW AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Initiated through the Community Development Committee. See background section.

RECOMMENDATION

That the City Council: 1) receive staff report; 2) take public comment; 3) deliberate; and 4) provide direction to staff regarding whether or not staff should undertake permitting, environmental review and installation of scenic tower viewer binoculars on the Coastal Trail and if yes, provide feedback to staff regarding whether to install coin operated machines, whether to include ADA binoculars and preferred locations.

ALTERNATIVES

Provide other direction to Staff.

ATTACHMENTS

1. Survey
2. Vendor Comparison

NOTIFICATION

"Notify Me" subscriber lists