

Los Gatos Parks & Sustainability Commission

Trail Connectivity Ad-Hoc Committee

Summary Report

January, 2024

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1. Introduction

On June 5, 2023, the Los Gatos Parks Commission (now Parks & Sustainability Commission) created an ad-hoc committee to investigate and report on desired connections between Los Gatos Parks, local open space preserves, and key areas in town. The members of the committee are Brant Corenson and Craig Gleason.

This report serves as the concrete output of the ad-hoc committee. It is intended to be used in the future by the Parks & Public Works Department in any of a number of ways, for example (but not limited to):

- When developments are done in town or nearby, the town could pursue easements for desirable trails
- Landowners whose properties are in the vicinity of the desirable connections could be consulted to see if they are open to providing easements (this may in particular apply to Williamson Act properties)
- When properties come up for sale, the town could investigate the possibility of acquiring the land or placing easements on it
- The town could identify initiatives to build trails to make the desired connections

The Los Gatos 2040 General Plan contains a number of related items, including Implementation Programs 5.9 F, J, K, L and 8.12 C, D.

While desired connections have not been formally scored, the ad-hoc committee members have provided some indication of priorities. Some factors impacting priority are:

- Current popularity of the park or open space which is the subject of the connection
- Current difficulty of reaching the open space on foot, bike or horseback
- Complexity of making a connection, for example if many properties would need to be crossed (increased complexity); or known trail easements already exist (reduced complexity)
- Improved safety of access

A guiding assumption is that these connections would generally be multi-use trails where the endpoints (parks or open spaces) are multi-use, though local considerations might impact those choices. Another assumption is that they could generally be narrow (3-4' tread width), natural surface trails. Note that this might require some update in town policies.

2. Methodology

The ad-hoc committee created a GIS project consisting of the following layers:

- Los Gatos town boundary
- Local trails
 - Official Los Gatos Trails GIS layer
 - Local Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District (MROSD) trails
 - Additional trail data from OpenStreetMap, including some social trails
- Official Los Gatos Parks GIS layer
- Property map data from Santa Clara County (including lot numbers but not owners' names)

- Williamson Act properties in Los Gatos
- Los Gatos projects including Los Gatos/Almaden Pollinator Garden, and the proposed Los Gatos Community Garden and Lynn Ave. Pedestrian Path

For the most part the GIS data is intended as conceptual and there may be errors due to the crowd-sourced nature of some data.

To this GIS project we added the desired connections as conceptual point-to-point lines. A small amount of information was added to the database to indicate a name for each connection as well as the intended to/from points (again, conceptual and not exact locations).

No specific assumptions were made about trail alignments or which properties the connections would cross, though in many cases certain properties are the most likely or obvious possibilities. Except for identifying some existing easements, no outreach or other work has been done, for example to find out if any property owners would be amenable to trails or trail easements. It is expected that any such work would be handled through an appropriate process by town staff. The same is the case with any potential joint projects with local land managers such as MROSD or Santa Clara County Parks – the town would have to work with those agencies to coordinate any project related to connecting to these open spaces or parks.

3. Desired Connections

Los Gatos provides a variety of parks and is partly encircled by wonderful open spaces. These places are generally well connected to their surrounding neighborhoods, but for residents further away it's typically necessary to navigate to or between them on busy roads. One exception is that the Los Gatos Creek Trail provides a central corridor which makes it much easier to access a number of parks and open spaces without traveling long distances on roads. The Creek Trail provides hiking and biking connectivity between downtown and points to the north such as Oak Meadow and Vasona Parks, as well as to the south to MROSD open spaces and Lexington Reservoir County Park.

Connections to the east and west are much more difficult. The combined area of Belgatos Park, Heintz Open Space, Santa Rosa Open Space and Shannon Valley Open Space is generally accessible only via busy roads (Blossom Hill and Shannon). The Kennedy Trail in Sierra Azul Open Space Preserve is popular but accessible only via Kennedy Road. El Sereno Open Space Preserve is most commonly accessed via Overlook and Sheldon Roads from downtown. Open space access in a future Los Gatos could be dramatically improved by providing safe and pleasant trail connections to these spaces. Those trails would also provide more opportunities to connect people to nature close to home and/or with less driving.

Individual opportunities are shown below.

3.1. Shady Lane to Belgatos/Heintz/Santa Rosa

Belgatos Park and its two connected open spaces are an important area for hikers, mountain bikers and equestrians. Neighborhood access is very good from the north and east, but in particular non-driving access from the west (toward downtown) is problematic. Blossom Hill and Shannon Roads are still uncomfortable and dangerous routes to travel on bike or foot. Conceptually, there is an opportunity to connect from the area of Shady Lane (off Short Road between Blossom Hill and Shannon) through developments and private lots to Heintz Open Space. Some trail easements exist through Highlands of Los Gatos. The final part of this alignment would likely go through two privately-owned and unbuilt lots owned by the same person. Two parts of this connection are identified and shown in Figure 1: Highlands Trail (where easements exist and some of the trail corridor appears to have been benched) and Shady to Heintz. Green outlines indicate Williamson Act lots (see 4. Williamson Act Parcels).

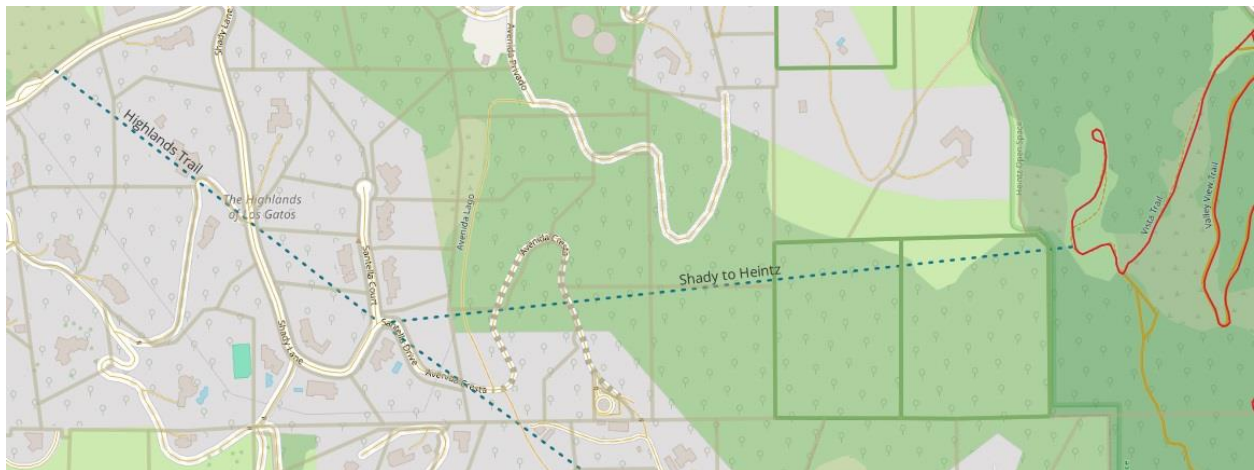


Figure 1 Shady Lane to Belgatos/Heintz/Santa Rosa

3.2. Shady Lane to Shannon Road

Some informal connections exist from the top of Shady Lane in the Highlands of Los Gatos to Shannon Road via Rock Ridge Road, though this exits onto the steep and relatively dangerous part of Shannon Road west of its summit. It would be desirable to connect to the high point of Shannon near Sky Lane as shown at the left side of Figure 2. Alternatively, access to Sky Lane serves this purpose if public access is available.

3.3. Shannon Road to Belgatos/Heintz/Santa Rosa

This connection, shown at the right side of Figure 2, has a few components as there are some existing paths and uses whose legality could be clarified, as well as potential future trail connections.

A short segment of social trail exists between Santa Rosa Open Space and Sky Lane (likely on private property). Trail users have historically accessed this segment, however the intended use/non-use is ambiguous.

Likewise, Sky Lane itself has often been used for access to Santa Rosa Open Space from Shannon Road. Sky Lane appears to go through private property and local residents are known to advise cyclists of this, though public access rights are unclear. It would be worthwhile for the town to clarify this and to advocate for public access in both of these cases.

A trail connection from the south side of Santa Rosa Open Space to Shannon Road would be highly desirable as part of an ultimate connection between that area and Sierra Azul at Kennedy Fire Trail (see next item).

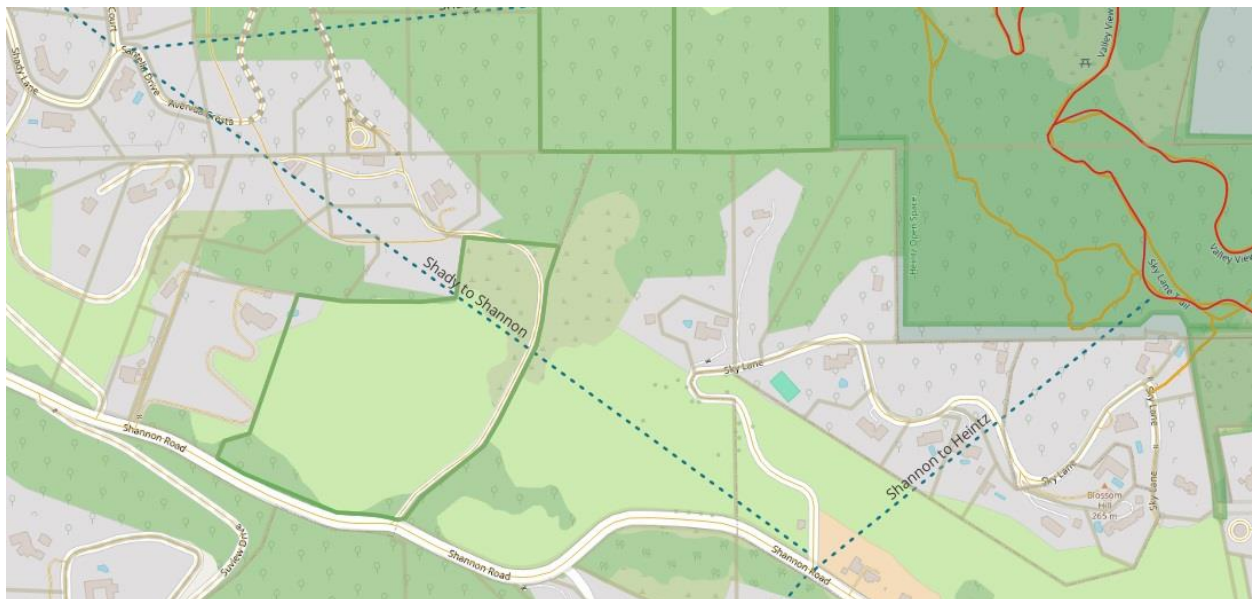


Figure 2: Shady Lane to Shannon Road and Shannon to Heintz/Belgatos/Santa Rosa

3.4. Shannon Road to Kennedy Fire Trail

As indicated above, a complete through connection from the Belgatos/Heintz/Santa Rosa area to the Kennedy Fire Trail would be valuable. This opportunity deals with the southern portion of the connection, between Shannon Road and the trailhead. Currently many people park on Top of the Hill Road on the north side of Kennedy Road. Potentially that road could serve as part of a connection. There are various options where crossing two private properties would allow a connection to Shannon Road, in the vicinity of Sky Lane near Shannon's highest point (any crossing of Shannon would be safest near this high point as the road is straight and has good sight lines).

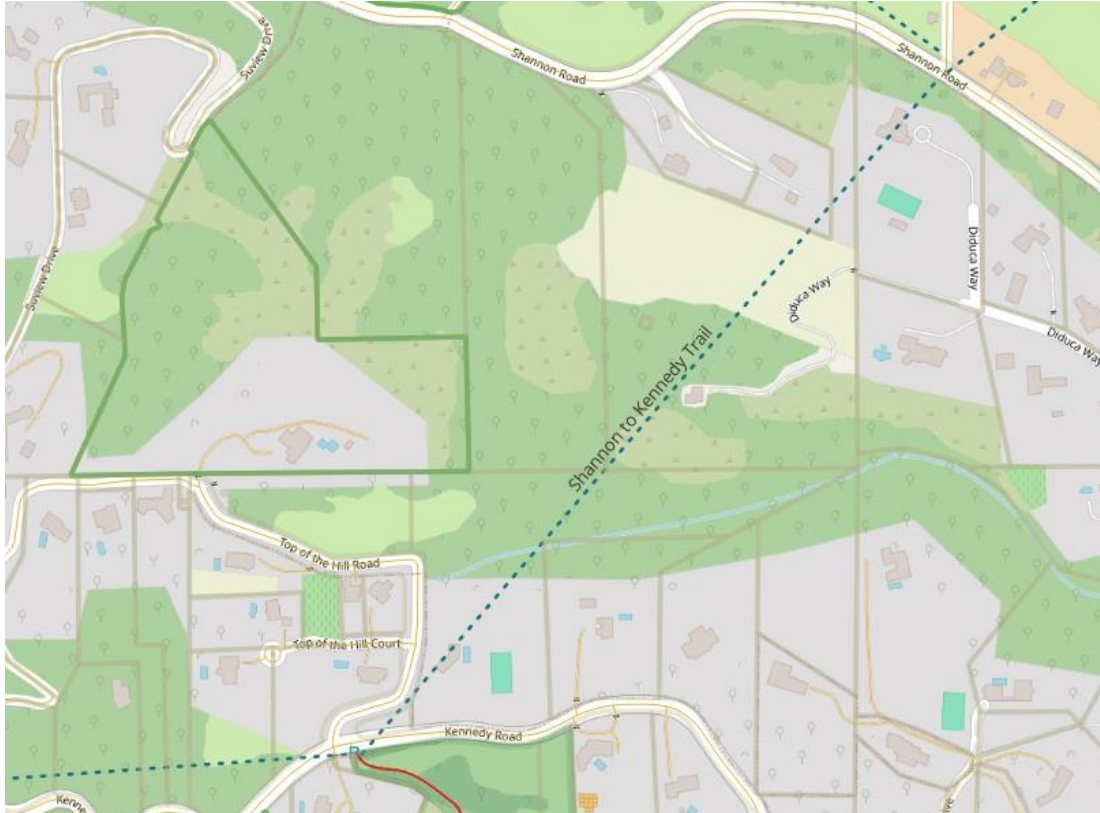


Figure 3: Shannon Road to Kennedy Fire Trail

3.5. Forrester Road to Kennedy Fire Trail

This connection appears complicated as Kennedy Road is lined with many private lots and the surrounding land is steep with various drainages to cross, however the Kennedy Fire Trail is a popular area for hikers and mountain bikers and any improvement in access (and safety) would be valuable. Partial connections could be useful, but in general the desire would be to connect from the area of the Kennedy Loop (near Forrester Road) to the trailhead as shown in Figure 4.

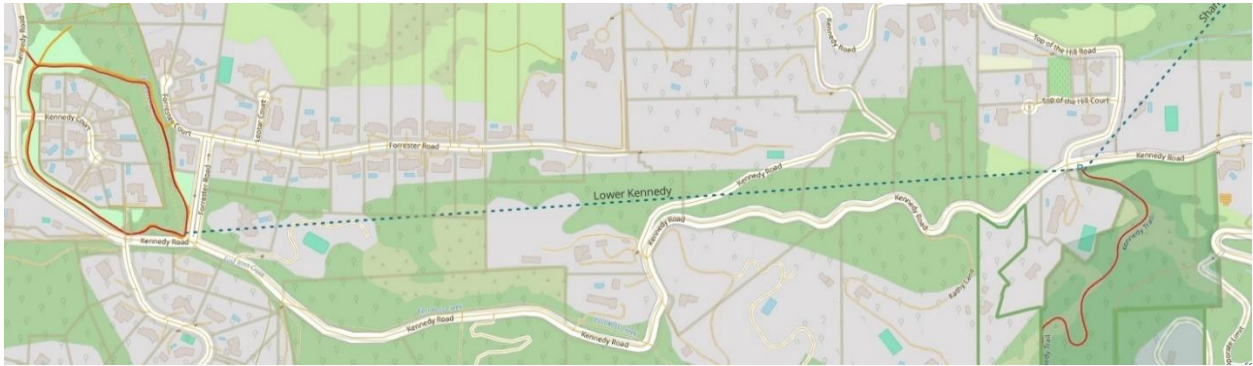


Figure 4: Forrester Road to Kennedy Fire Trail

3.6. Shannon Valley Open Space to Santa Rosa Open Space

Shannon Valley Open Space connects to the eastern end of Santa Rosa Drive which provides one connection to the Santa Rosa Open Space, however the open space includes an unnamed trail which extends to the west almost to Alta Tierra Court. Connecting this trail through to one of the local roads (most likely the western part of Santa Rosa Drive) would provide a more flexible and pleasant connection between the open spaces. See Figure 5.

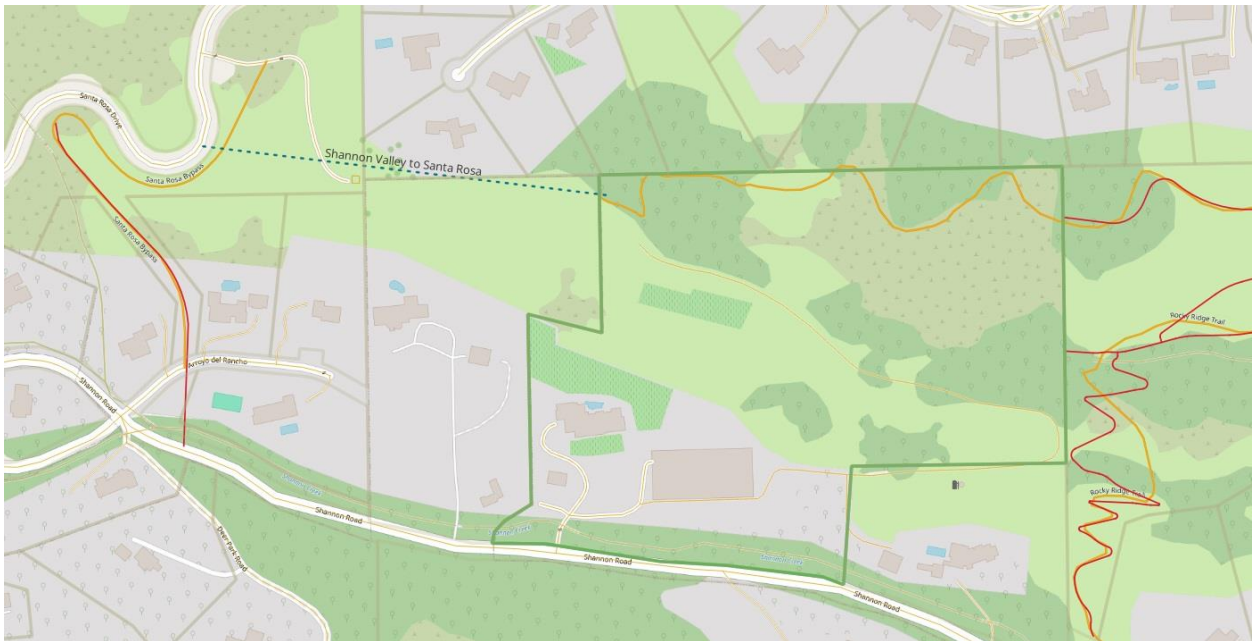


Figure 5: Shannon Valley to Santa Rosa

3.7. Foster Road to St. Joseph's Hill

At the northeast corner of St. Joseph's Hill, the Novitiate Trail ends in a gate to a Novitiate fire road. At that point the trail is within a short distance of Foster Road. It would be desirable to find connections on this end of St. Joseph's Hill, as shown at the right side of Figure 6.

3.8. Downtown to St. Joseph's Hill

St. Joseph's Hill is managed by MROSD and is an extremely popular area for local hikers and mountain bikers. It is accessible from town via Jones Road and by hiking trail from the Main Street Bridge. One issue with this entrance is that bikes are restricted to the Jones Trail which is the most popular route for hikers to climb and descend the hill. Since the trail is steep and wide, this results in many high speed crossings. It would be highly desirable to provide a narrower, winding, lower speed but higher value trail which mountain bikers would preferentially use to descend the hill, thus allowing hikers to use the more direct route with less interference from downhill bikes.

In addition, it is desirable to find additional access points for the hill. The land just between St. Joseph's Hill Open Space Preserve and downtown is owned by the Society of Jesus (Novitiate) and MROSD holds a conservation easement over most of it. It appears that the Novitiate allows (or tolerates?) hiking on this land, though signage is ambiguous (including both no trespassing signs and clean up after your dog signs!). This land could play a large part in improving access and reducing congestion and user conflict on St. Joseph's Hill.

Two alternatives for this connection are shown in Figure 6.

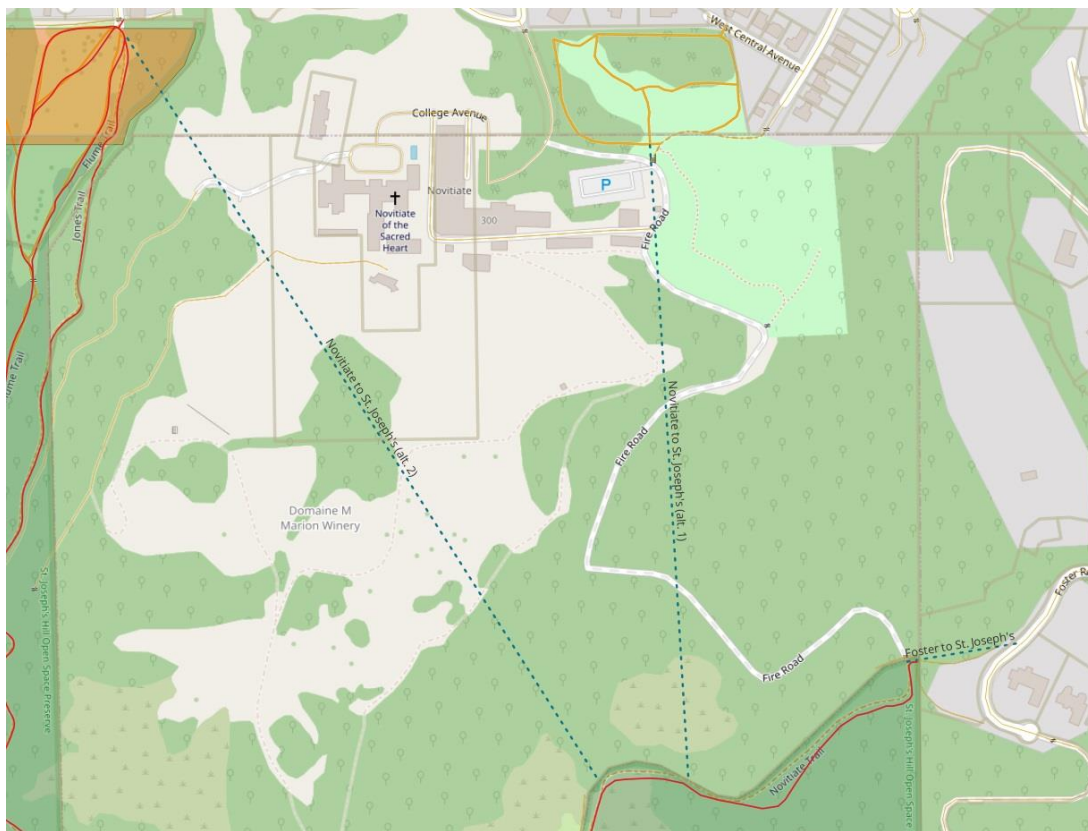


Figure 6: Downtown to St. Joseph's Hill

3.9. Downtown to El Sereno

El Sereno Open Space Preserve is also managed by MROSD. From Los Gatos, the most common access point is the end of Sheldon Road, a private road with a public access easement which is accessed from Overlook Road. There is very little parking on the roads up to this trailhead, and these are steep and narrow roads which are not very well suited for hiking. Nevertheless, many people do access this trailhead and it would be worthwhile to look for better connections. Two candidate locations for access lower on the hill would be Fairview Plaza (or Manzanita Avenue) and the top of Wood Road. Each of these locations have options where a relatively small number of private properties sit between the road and the Aquinas Trail in El Sereno. The two alternative routes are shown in Figure 7.

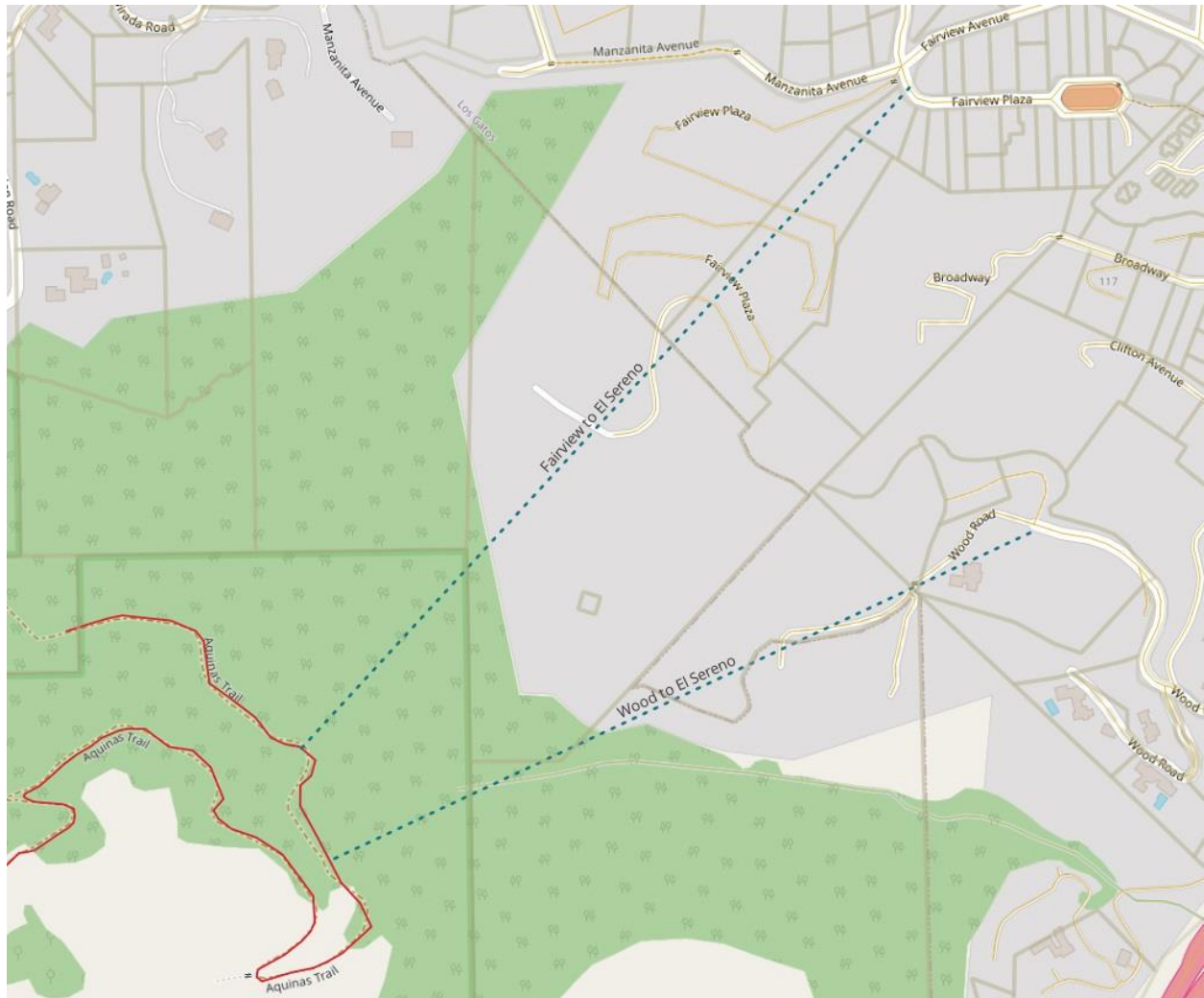


Figure 7: Downtown to El Sereno

3.10. Ravinia to Sierra Azul

An alternate path to Sierra Azul could be provided via Ravinia Way. Some local residents have been interested in making this connection and the property across which the connection would pass may be for sale. An existing road on the property provides access most of the way to Sierra Azul, though there are no existing trails in this part of the open space preserve and no current plans to provide them. Residents expressed openness to formalizing parking on the flat part of Teresita below Ravinia. Such a connection (Figure 8) could provide access to Sierra Azul from a point closer to town than others but overall plans would have to be coordinated with MROSD. Note that this part of Sierra Azul is not currently open to the public and there are no current plans to build trails in this section of the preserve.

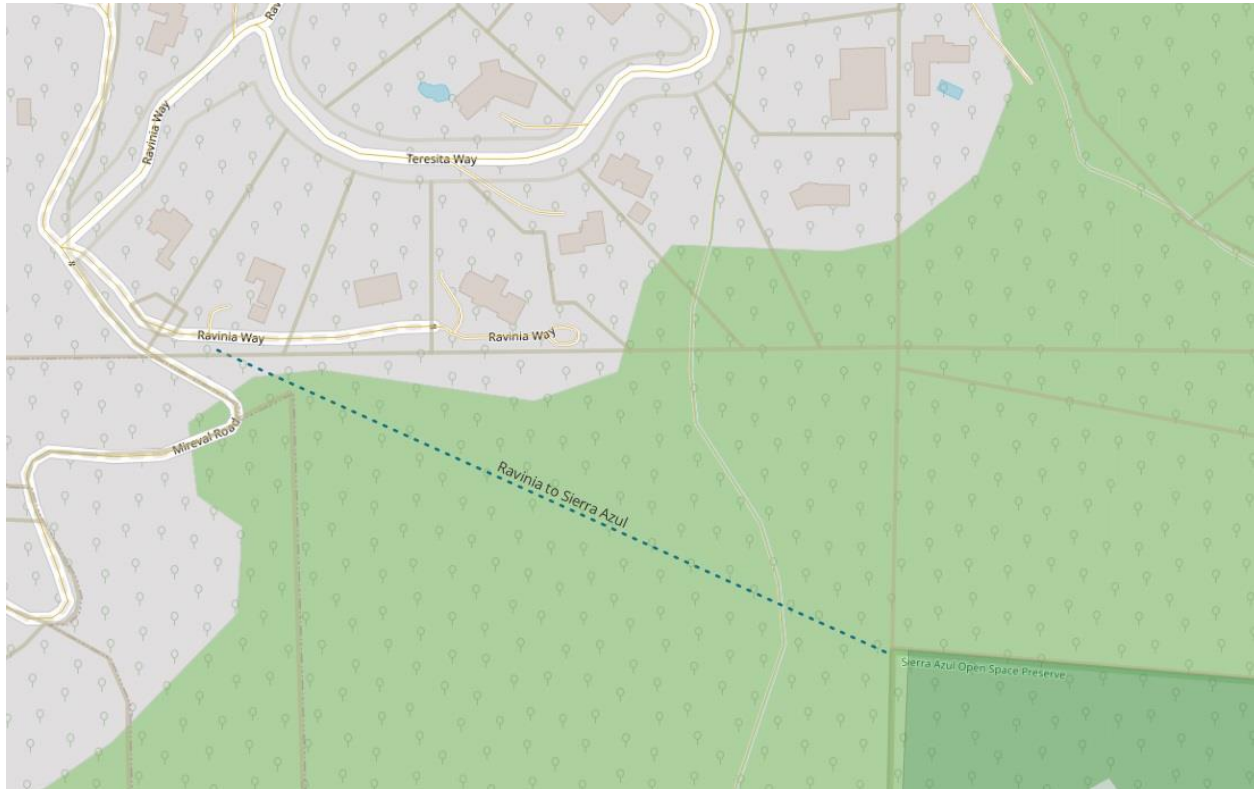


Figure 8: Ravinia to Sierra Azul

3.11. Pathways to and from Los Gatos Community Garden and Lynn Ave. Pedestrian Path
The PG&E corridor where the Los Gatos Community Garden and Lynn Ave. Pedestrian Path are planned runs through Live Oak Park and extends to Camden Ave. and beyond. In the long term it would be highly desirable for a safe pathway to exist along this corridor or as much of it as possible. It would provide off-street connectivity to the garden and path projects as well as to other parks and paths. Los Gatos is missing a major east-west pathway of this type. Figure 9 shows these conceptual connections.



Figure 9: Live Oak Manor Park to Community Garden and to Camden

3.12. La Rinconada Park to Vasona Park

At the south end of La Rinconada Park, a trail extends to Bicknell Road. While a complete off-road connection would be difficult, it would be useful to examine the route between this trail and Vasona Park for potential improvements. This is shown in the lower part of Figure 10.

3.13. Railroad Corridor to Los Gatos Creek Trail

The railroad corridor running beside Highway 85 is a strong candidate for a regional trail in the future. Some segments of this trail in Saratoga have been formalized. It would be desirable to formalize the Los Gatos segment of this passage and to work with surrounding cities and the county to create the regional trail. Near Vasona Junction (Winchester & 85) a safe connection to the Los Gatos Creek Trail would be valuable. Both of these segments are shown in the upper part of Figure 10.

Los Gatos is colored in light green in this figure to illustrate where these connections might approach and cross town limits.

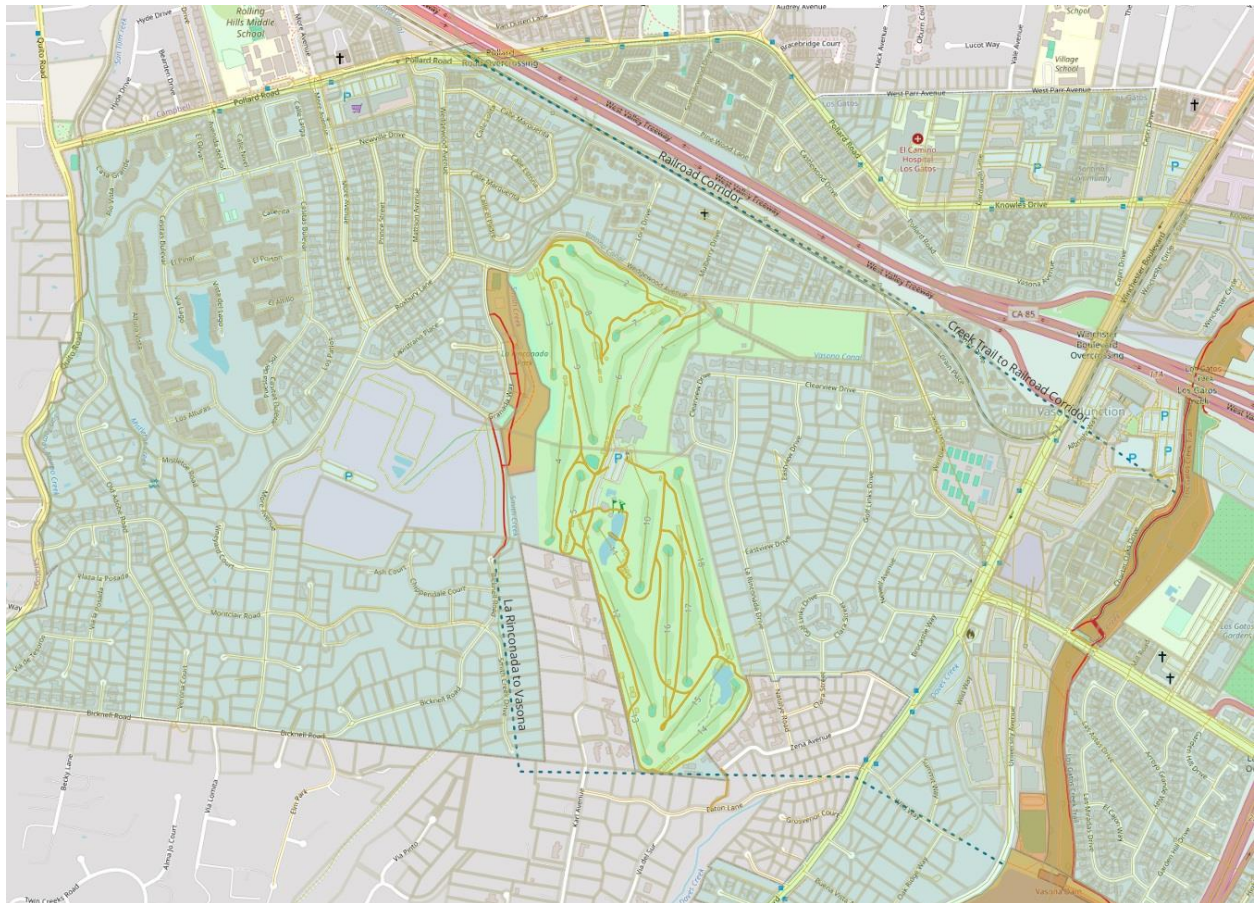


Figure 10: La Rinconada and Railroad Corridor Connections

4. Williamson Act Parcels

According to the California Department of Conservation:

The Williamson Act, also known as the California Land Conservation Act of 1965, enables local governments to enter into contracts with private landowners for the purpose of restricting specific parcels of land to agricultural or related open space use. In return, landowners receive property tax assessments which are much lower than normal because they are based upon farming and open space uses as opposed to full market value.

Figure 11 shows (outlined in green) the Los Gatos properties that are subject to the Williamson Act. This status may assist in efforts to realize some of the desired connections.

Note: The Williamson parcels shown in the ad-hoc's GIS database were identified by visually cross-referencing between the low resolution map shown in the 2040 General Plan and the actual parcel map supplied by Santa Clara County. This should be cross-checked by town staff to make sure the correct parcels were identified.

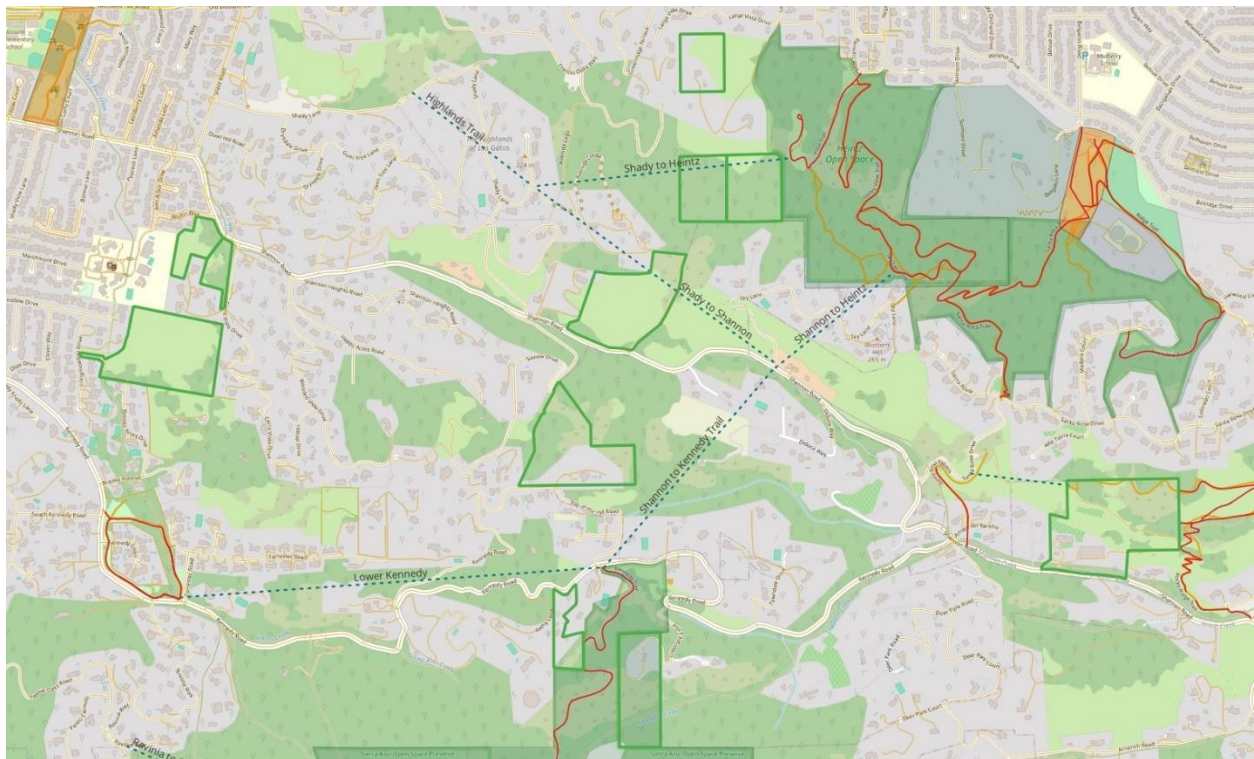


Figure 11: Los Gatos Williamson Act Parcels

5. Priorities

Any formal prioritization should be done by town staff with appropriate public involvement. The ad-hoc committee has discussed priorities and suggests the Shady Lane to Heintz Open Space connections as the most valuable due to the quality of recreation opportunities in the Belgatos/Heintz/Santa Rosa area as well as the current difficulty of accessing this area from the west. At least part of this route has existing trail easements.

6. Resources

6.1. Shannon Valley and Shady Lane trails (Google Map):

This annotated Google map was prepared by Jim Handy, former Los Gatos Parks commissioner. It shows the existing Shannon Valley trails (in blue) and the easements through the Highlands of Los Gatos subdivision (in red).

<https://maps.google.com/maps/ms?ie=UTF8&t=p&source=embed&oe=UTF8&msa=0&msid=218327769807473927561.00045d1db4cc2eadece2c&dg=feature>

6.2. Ad-Hoc Committee GIS database

Figures above are generated from the database created by the ad-hoc committee. This data will be provided to Los Gatos PPW staff.