



STAFF REPORT

Meeting Type: Watershed Committee/Board of Directors
Title: Azalea Hill Project Update
From: Shaun Horne, Director of Watershed Resources
Through: Ben Horenstein, General Manager
Meeting Date: December 19, 2024

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TYPE OF ACTION: Action X Information Review and Refer

RECOMMENDATION: Receive update on the Azalea Hill Project

SUMMARY: On May 14, 2019 the District Board of Directors approved the Restoration of the Azalea Hill Trail Project (Project) through an amendment to the Mt. Tamalpais Watershed Road and Trail Management Plan (RTMP) for the Restoration of Azalea Hill Trail (Project) and the adoption of the 2019 Azalea Hill Initial Study/Mitigated Negative Declaration for the Project (IS/MND), including a mitigation monitoring and reporting program (MMRP). During calendar year 2024, the District installed one retaining wall, built two bridges, armored multiple rock crossings, improved trail drainage, hardened tread surfaces and maintained temporary project signage. In conjunction with the work on the Project, District staff and consultants continue to implement the MMRP. As part of ongoing implementation, District staff has identified the need to address site constraints and current conditions through potential future minor modifications to the Project. Staff will provide a short presentation that provides an overview of activities completed in 2024 and a summary of the potential future modifications to the Project.

DISCUSSION: Marin Water adopted an amendment to the *Mt. Tamalpais Watershed Road and Trail Management Plan* (RTMP) for the Restoration of Azalea Hill (Project) on May 14, 2019. The Project will: 1) remove approximately 4.4-miles of non-system roads and trails and restore those routes to natural conditions to improve habitat and water quality; 2) adopt and improve a 1.9-mile Class IV road comprised of the existing Liberty Gulch Road (1.2 miles) and convert an existing non-system trail (0.7 miles) to the wider, small vehicle route; 3) improve the hiking and equestrian route over Azalea Hill by correcting erosion and drainage problems along approximately 1.1 miles of existing Class VI trail, rerouting the trail around sensitive plants and adopting 250 feet of an existing non-system trail; and 4) treat the Azalea Hill parking lot to correct its erosion problems and improve the visitor amenities.

Upon completion, the Project will prevent an estimated 219 cubic yards of sediment from entering Azalea Hill's creeks and Alpine Lake annually (or 4,380 cubic yards over 20 years) and will restore approximately one acre of habitat. The Project consolidates the use of two existing routes proposed for

upgrades and provides a much-needed connection and safety improvement between the “Lakes” and “Pine Mountain” areas.

Work by district staff and contractors continued on Phases I, II & III, starting in April 2024, along existing sections of the ‘Azalea Hill’, ‘Liberty Gulch’ and ‘Old Ranch’ Trails. Work involved the installation of one retaining wall, two additional bridges, armoring multiple wet crossings, improving surface drainage and hardening tread surfaces along approximately 1.5 miles of trail that follows Bon Tempe Creek and then along the northeastern shoreline of Lake Alpine up to Bolinas-Fairfax Road. Multiple volunteer work days during 2024 continued to support tread improvements and brushing along Phase I, II & III alignments. For National Trails Day in June, over 40 volunteers assisted district staff with varied work across all three phases of the Project. Throughout 2024, the Santa Cruz Mountain Trail Stewards provided technical assistance and performed a supervisory role overseeing Conservation Corps North Bay crews during trail drainage improvements, armored wet crossing installations and trail corridor brushing. Funding for this work came from a State Parks Recreation Trails Program Grant, which was secured to support the implementation of the Liberty Gulch segment of the Project. Construction work will continue on Phases I, II & III through 2025.

CEQA requires a lead public agency to develop a Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Plan or Program (MMRP) when making any necessary findings related to an Environmental Impact Report (EIR) or when approving a Mitigated Negative Declaration. The intent of the MMRP is to document the mitigation measures required to be implemented. In accordance with Section 15074(d) of the CEQA Guidelines and California Public Resources Code Section 21081.6(a) (1), the District adopted the MMRP as presented in Appendix F of the Final IS/MND for the Project.

The MMRP includes all mitigation measures in the FEIR MMRP and new mitigation measures resulting from the Final IS/MND that is used to guide construction activities. To verify and document the required mitigation measures presented in the IS/MND, the District tracks all activities throughout the implementation phases. Pre-project surveys and ongoing monitoring and mitigation work is conducted by District staff, contractors and consultants. To facilitate construction and ensure compliance with the Azalea Hill IS/MND, pre-project surveys were conducted and an Environmental Mitigation Monitoring Check List was reviewed to track and document mitigation measures within the MMRP. All staff and contractors received pre-construction wildlife and rare plant avoidance training. Native plant surveys, first conducted in 2020, informed appropriate 2024 rare plant avoidance measures during the construction of the retaining wall and two bridges, as well as other tread improvements along the ‘Old Ranch’, ‘Fishermans’ and ‘Liberty Gulch’ Trails. Invasive plant removal targeted during Phase II and III work included: bull thistle, Italian thistle, bristly ox-tongue, tall fescue and false-brome. Split rail fencing and signs were installed in select areas to discourage the use of social trails in an effort to support decommissioning.

During the implementation of the Project, District staff have identified certain site constraints and existing conditions that support the need for minor modifications to the Project. The proposed changes encompass maintaining existing trail widths along a short portion of Segment 2 of the Liberty Gulch Trail, to avoid impacts to sensitive plant species. With this change, the trail segment would not meet Class IV standards from the 2005 Mt. Tamalpais Watershed Road and Trail Management Plan (Roads and Trails Plan). Additionally, some stream crossings do not require any improvements. Staff is conducting review of these proposed changes and will bring a detailed report to a future meeting.

ENVIRONMENTAL REVIEW: On May 14, 2019, the District Board approved Resolution No. 8533 adopting the Azalea Hill Initial Study/Mitigated Negative Declaration and Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program for the Restoration of Azalea Hill Project and (2) approved Resolution No. 8534 which approved the Project and amended the Mt. Tamalpais Watershed Road and Trail Management – Restoration of Azalea Hill.

FISCAL IMPACT: None.

ATTACHMENT(S): None.