Draft
Issue Paper on
Open Space

City of Calabasas General Plan Update

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SUMMARY

Survey results and GPAC discussions have demonstrated that the majority of residents in the City of Calabasas care about open space. There are currently around 3,000 acres of open space within City boundaries, which far exceeds national standards. Given this large inventory of open space, City efforts should now be focused on improving open space management. The City can reserve acquisition efforts for parcels of especially high priority. Open space management needs include establishing an open space manager, conducting a precise inventory of open space in Calabasas, improving access and signage, and coordinating open space management programs between agencies.

INTRODUCTION

The issue of open space is central when considering planning for the future of the City of Calabasas. Not only is open space the predominant land use within the corporate boundary, but one that is of strong importance to the community in terms of both defining the city’s image and providing an point of widespread consensus. Open space is desirable in Calabasas. At the February 15, 2007 General Plan Advisory Committee (GPAC) meeting, GPAC members were asked to describe their reasons for moving to Calabasas, what they like most about Calabasas, and their top issues of concern for Calabasas. Most of the members mentioned an appreciation for open space and a desire to preserve existing open space in their responses.

The results of a statistically-valid 2005 telephone survey of 586 Calabasas residents suggest that the GPAC’s interest in open space is shared by the Calabasas community as a whole. Open space was listed in the top six responses to the questions “What is the one feature or characteristic that makes the City of Calabasas a desirable place for you to live?” and “What is the one characteristic that you like best about your neighborhood?”

Results from the community survey of 301 residents conducted in spring 2007 for this current General Plan Update reinforce the importance of open space to Calabasas residents. Eight out of ten households polled stated that they felt the goals “preserve the scenic beauty of Calabasas through guidelines and standards,” “preserve open space for community view and recreation benefits,” and “protect rural lifestyle and provide environmental and open space protection” were “very important.”

Given the priority open space holds as an issue of primary concern in Calabasas, this issue paper will focus on how General Plan policies can be updated to reflect the evolving needs of Calabasas residents. It addresses the status of open space management in the City and the effectiveness of existing General Plan policies regarding open space, thereby laying groundwork for policy development and refinement.
BACKGROUND INFORMATION

Open space within Calabasas fulfills four basic purposes, as outlined in the current General Plan:

1. Protection of significant environmental resources (e.g., biological and scenic resources)
2. Protection of public safety (e.g., prevention of landslides)
3. Management of resource production (e.g., agricultural and mineral resources)
4. Public recreation

In approaching open space as a policy matter, it is important to recognize the difference between officially-designated or managed open space on the one hand, and undeveloped land that has development potential on the other. The term “open space” is not well-defined in current usage. For the purposes of this issue paper, the term “open space” refers to land that is specifically designated as open space under the General Plan, and therefore is not regarded as holding private development potential. Open space lands as public resources are commonly protected through City ownership, but privately-held lands may be similarly protected through easements, covenants, or conditions placed on such lands.

CURRENT STATUS OF OPEN SPACE IN CALABASAS

General Plan Policies

The stated Open Space Objective from the current Calabasas General Plan is to create “a citywide system consisting of approximately 3,000 acres of protected natural open space whose location and size represents an extensive network of protected areas with a high degree of visual and physical continuity, and a systematic order of purpose.”

The open space policies in the current General Plan are listed below:

A.1 Limit the permitted intensity of development within currently uncommitted open space lands to that which is consistent with environmental values and the sensitivity of specific environmental features, including but not limited to riparian areas, wildlife habitats and linkages.

A.2 Support the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy and the Santa Monica Mountains Land Trust in their development rights purchase programs to retire development rights within the City and its General Plan study area; support the efforts of the National Park Service and California Department of Parks and Recreation to expand areas devoted to regional recreational open space within and adjacent to the General Plan study area.

1 The status of parks and recreation facilities within the City of Calabasas is discussed in detail in a separate issue paper.
A.3 Promote clustered development to preserve large, unbroken blocks of open space within critical habitat areas, and protect the integrity of habitat linkages, and enhance protection from natural hazards where clustering can be accomplished without creating urban development patterns in rural areas.

A.4² Limit landform modification to preserve ridgelines, other significant landforms within the General Plan study area, and a feeling of “openness” throughout the community.

A.5 Limit road access into open space areas to that which is consistent with the area’s open space values.

A.6 Limit future urban and rural development to those areas where an appropriate level of safety can be provided to new residents and visitors; maintain areas where such a level of safety can not be achieved to open space use consistent with the degree of hazard.

A.7 Minimize the visual prominence of urban and rural development features by emphasizing retention of natural features and screening of urban and rural development where it is permitted.

A.8 Preserve views of area hillsides and open ridgelines.

Acreage and Land Use Designations

Figure 1 (attached) illustrates the current distribution of lands designated as open space in the Calabasas General Plan planning area. Figure 2 (attached) illustrates the current zoning designations of open space lands within the City boundaries. Table 1 below shows the acreage of land within the City boundaries that is either designated as open space under the General Plan, or is zoned as open space. Table 1 also lists the average number of acres of each type of open space per 1,000 people. Note that lands zoned OS do allow for single family residential development at a very low density, while the other zoning designations OS-DR and REC do not allow for development except for the recreational facilities permitted under REC.

² Policies in the current General Plan are misnumbered, such that there are two policies labeled A.3. We have corrected this error here, but readers should be aware of this discrepancy when cross-referencing the General Plan.
Table 1: Current open space acreage and ratios in the City of Calabasas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Land Use Designation</th>
<th>Zoning Designation</th>
<th>Acres within City boundaries</th>
<th>Acres per 1,000 people*</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Open Space-Resource Protection (OS-RP): Primary purpose is protection of public health and safety, preservation of sensitive environmental resources, or resource management. Max intensity: 1 dwelling unit per 160 acres, or per buildable lot, whichever is greater.</td>
<td>Open Space (OS): Intended for areas identified by General Plan as having important environmental resources and/or hazards</td>
<td>402</td>
<td>17.19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open Space-Development Restricted (OS-DR): Same as OS but with development limited to open space/recreational uses.</td>
<td>Open Space-Development Restricted (OS-DR): Same as OS but with development limited to open space/recreational uses.</td>
<td>2,488</td>
<td>106.38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Public Facilities-Institutional (PF-I): Intended for a variety of public and quasi-public uses</td>
<td>Public Facilities-Institutional (PF-I): Intended for a variety of public and quasi-public uses</td>
<td>11 (Bay Laurel Elementary)</td>
<td>N/A</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open Space-Recreational (OS-R): Public or private ownership, primary purpose is provision of active or passive recreation. Max intensity: 1 dwelling unit per lot of record.</td>
<td>Open Space-Recreational (OS-R): Public or private ownership, primary purpose is provision of active or passive recreation. Max intensity: 1 dwelling unit per lot of record.</td>
<td>163 (Calabasas Golf Club)</td>
<td>6.97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>3,064</td>
<td>131.01</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Based on the data in Table 1, it appears Calabasas has achieved its goal of “creating” approximately 3,000 acres of protected natural open space. At this juncture, the GPAC may wish to consider a clarified open space objective for the city; one that defines “protected natural open space,” and bases the acreage on a measurable standard, such as a population ratio.

**Comparison to National Standards**

The National Park and Recreation Association recommends a standard of 15 acres of open space per 1,000 people. In 2004, the City of Calabasas released a Parks Master Plan that assessed the City’s need for open space. The need was evaluated based on national standards in combination with professional assessment of local conditions. More information on how these needs estimates were calculated is available on the City website, in Appendix E of the Parks Master Plan.

Table 2 illustrates the status of park lands in Calabasas as of 2004. This table describes only City-owned parks and open space areas, and therefore does not count open space protected in ways other than outright ownership. For the same reason, it does not reflect...
areas in the larger Planning Area geography; instead focusing on the city's incorporated area. The Parks Master Plan identified 1,400 additional acres of open space owned by non-profits and other public agencies in 2004.

Table 2: Comparison of City-owned park acreage versus recommended standards

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Area</th>
<th>Existing Acreage per 1,000 people</th>
<th>Recommended Standard</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mini-Parks</td>
<td>0.11</td>
<td>0.08</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood Parks</td>
<td>0.49</td>
<td>0.22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Parks</td>
<td>0.39</td>
<td>0.80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Use Areas</td>
<td>1.21</td>
<td>1.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open Space Areas</td>
<td>14.17</td>
<td>15.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Source: City of Calabasas Parks Master Plan, 2004

Based on this inventory of open space, the need for additional open space in Calabasas was estimated, and is shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Assessment of recreation and open space need in Calabasas

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Area</th>
<th>Existing Inventory</th>
<th>Year 2002 Demand</th>
<th>Current Additional Need*</th>
<th>Build-out Demand 3 *</th>
<th>Build-out Additional Need</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Mini-Parks</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>1.6</td>
<td>(0.6)</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Neighborhood Parks</td>
<td>10.0</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>(7.0)</td>
<td>6.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Parks</td>
<td>8.0</td>
<td>16.2</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>22.0</td>
<td>14.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Special Use Areas</td>
<td>34.6</td>
<td>20.5</td>
<td>(14.1)</td>
<td>34.6</td>
<td>0.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Open Space Areas</td>
<td>287.6</td>
<td>304.5</td>
<td>16.9</td>
<td>411.0</td>
<td>123.4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undeveloped</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
<td>NA</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Additional need is indicated in plain text. Excess capacity is indicated with parentheses.

* Buildout calculations are based on a population estimate of 27,400 in 2020.

According to this analysis, Calabasas will need 123.4 additional acres of open space by 2020 in order to maintain the recommended level of service. However, if the 1,400 acres of open space owned by home owner associations, the Mountains Restoration Trust, and other public agencies (other than the City) were included in the calculations, Calabasas would far exceed the recommended open space standard. This begs the question of whether land owned by these other parties fulfills the open space function desired by city residents. Given that the majority of open space in Calabasas is currently owned by organizations other than the City, and that survey results show the
majority of Calabasas residents are happy with the current provision of open space in the City, we can infer that the ownership of open space is of less importance than the functionality desired by city residents.

Since the total of 3,064 acres of open space shown in Table 1 exceeds national standards, as well as the City’s own goal, the GPAC may wish to shift the focus to policies that improve the management and utility of open space lands, rather than focusing strongly on new acquisitions.

TOWARDS AN IMPROVEMENT OF OPEN SPACE MANAGEMENT AND UTILITY

While the current City General Plan contains policies designed to protect open space, there are several features of the current open space system that the City may want to address through the General Plan Update to improve management and utility.

Coordinate Open Space Management

The Calabasas planning area possesses a substantial amount of open space; however, the City does not currently have a centralized mechanism for coordinating protection or management of this land use type. As indicated in the Parks Master Plan, the City has recommended creating the position of Open Space Manager. However, the position has not yet been created and has not yet been filled. An open space manager could improve management in a number of ways, including:

- Monitoring the protection and management responsibility status of open space lands,
- Completing and maintaining a full inventory of open space ownership,
- Ensuring that conveyances and deed restrictions of open space are properly recorded;
- Developing interagency protocols for coordinating future acquisition and management programs,
- Clarifying access and passive recreation management protocols; and
- Coordinating habitat restoration efforts.

Clarify Ownership and Management Responsibility for Open Space Lands

Many open space areas in Calabasas are the result of set-asides that were features of past development agreements. In some cases, management responsibility for these areas has not been made clear as part of the approval process. There are cases where confusing legal questions have emerged. For example, the four parcels indicated in Figure 3 are parcels that were to be set aside as open space as a condition of project approval agreements. These parcels remain in private ownership and remain on the tax roll; however, the owners have not taken responsibility for maintaining the properties as
open space, and in some cases, the owners have not paid property taxes on the open space parcels since the deal was struck. While the City of Calabasas would like to see these parcels maintained as quality open space, the City may not have the resources to manage the routine maintenance and liability concerns associated with these parcels and other similar parcels.

This situation can be avoided in the future by ensuring that when an open space dedication is associated with approval of a project, management responsibilities are made clear, and possible endowments for management funding are arranged before final approval is given for the project. In the meantime, the GPAC may wish to recommend that the City allocate funding to acquire the four parcels shown in Figure 3, to ensure that they are maintained in accordance with open space policies.

As shown in Figure 4 (attached), many of the open space lands within the City are owned by private Homeowner Associations (the dark green parcels labeled as “other protected properties” are primarily owned by Homeowner Associations)\(^3\). Some associations are interested in conveying these properties to the City for management and public access. If such conveyances are deemed to be beneficial for Calabasas residents, the City may wish to incorporate policies into the General Plan update calling for the ownership transfer.

**Improve Access**

Figure 4 illustrates existing and proposed trails within the City of Calabasas, as well as the current ownership of existing open space lands. An open space manager would be instrumental in helping to ensure that trails are maintained. Trail maintenance can be complex, as many trails run through lands under different ownership and with different degrees of legal access (fee simple ownership vs. easements, for example).

Expanding access to open space lands could improve quality of life for Calabasas residents, and could strengthen open space protection efforts by fostering a sense of appreciation and stewardship for these lands among the public.

**Promote Open Space Corridors**

Linkages between open space areas, even through relatively narrow strips of land, can provide important corridors for wildlife. Open space corridors can also enhance public access by allowing for continuity in the trail system. The desire to preserve open space corridors is reflected in the City’s open space goal in the current General Plan, which calls for an open space network with a “high degree of physical continuity.”

**Education and Open Space Resource Identification**

One action recommended by GPAC members at a March 2007 meeting was to improve signage of open space lands. A coordinated signage program could indicate public

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\(^3\) Figure 4 does not show all open space lands within the city; rather, it identifies those lands associated with trails.
ownership of open space lands, and could greatly assist in conveying the degree of access allowable to specific parcels. Signs on protected open space lands would allow the public to differentiate between official protected open space and other unprotected undeveloped lands, helping to clarify the currently ambiguous terminology. Signs could also serve an interpretive function by explaining the history, wildlife, or other interesting aspects of an open space area.

Clarification of Terminology and Data in City Open Space Plans and Documents

The 2004 Parks Master Plan estimates the total amount of open space within city borders at 1,757 acres. The 2007 Draft Trails Master Plan states that Calabasas has 2,684 acres of open space within city borders. Neither the Parks Master Plan nor the Draft Trails Master Plan acreage figures correspond to the figure derived from General Plan land use designations and zoning map (3,064 acres). The breakdown of land use designations in Table 1 is a starting point for understanding why different plans may consider different categories of open space. Yet even when comparing the same categories, acreage estimate differ. For example, the 2,684 acres listed in the Draft Trails Master Plan is described as those areas in OS and OS-DR zoning designations; however, the calculations in Table 1, which are derived from General Plan land use and zoning maps current as of January 1, 2007, show total OS and OS-DR acreage as 2,901 acres, a difference of 217 acres from the figure in the Draft Trails Master Plan. The discrepancies between the Parks Master Plan, Trails Master Plan, and land use and zoning maps should be resolved so that the GPAC can develop new General Plan policies based on a uniform inventory of open space, and can clarify the City’s role in protecting and managing open space.

IMPROVING PROTECTION OF HILLSIDE/MOUNTAINOUS AREAS

In addition to land officially designated as Open Space under the General Plan, there are approximately 6,784 acres of large undeveloped areas within the City of Calabasas designated as Hillside/Mountainous (Figure 5). This designation allows very low-density (lot sizes of 10-40 acres) residential development, meaning that these lands could undergo limited subdivision and parcelization. As stated in the General Plan, these areas are “a significant biological and visual resource, and a key factor in Calabasas’ unique setting and community character. Remaining hillside and canyon areas encompass the majority of the remaining oak woodlands and riparian areas, and are the basis of the Calabasas area’s natural beauty.”

Development in Hillside/Mountainous areas is limited by a number of General Plan policies, mostly pertaining to grading restrictions. However, Hillside/Mountainous lands are privately owned, and are likely to experience increasing development pressure as housing pressure increases in the Calabasas area. Thus, while many Calabasas residents may consider the hillsides along the southern border of City “open space,” many of these hills are open space only in the visual sense; they are not officially or permanently protected.
While it appears Calabasas meets national standards for open space acreage within the City, it is important to consider unique local conditions when setting an open space objective. The hillsides in Calabasas are especially significant in terms of habitat and watershed protection, scenic vistas, and safety. The GPAC may wish to consider General Plan policies directing the City to acquire prioritized Hillside/Mountainous areas, to be managed as open space for the benefit of city residents.

In addition to outright acquisition of Hillside/Mountainous areas within City borders, the GPAC could consider annexation of the large acreages of Hillside/Mountainous land south of the City, within the Calabasas General Plan planning area. These areas, which can be seen in Figure 1, are identified as Hillside/Mountainous under the Calabasas General Plan, but the City has no jurisdiction over these lands since they fall outside the City boundary. Annexing these areas would allow the City to ensure that the land remains designated as Hillside/Mountainous, and that only open space or very low density residential uses are permitted.

FOR MORE INFORMATION

The Draft Open Space Acquisition and Management Plan (Appendix A), along with the Parks Master Plan and Trails Master Plan (available online), contain additional information on open space protection in Calabasas.

SOURCES

The information in this paper is drawn from the current City of Calabasas General Plan, Parks Master Plan, Trails Master Plan, City Municipal Code, the National Recreation and Parks Association website, the Draft Open Space Acquisition and Management Plan prepared for the City in April 2006, and input from the GPAC and the community survey conducted as part of this General Plan Update.
Updates:

On July 9, 2003, City Council adopted Resolution No. 2003-824 approving the Land Use Map, General Plan and Zone Changes:

1. Ord 2005-199 (2-2-05)
2. Ord 2005-205 (5-5-05)
3. Ord 2005-212 (11-16-05)
4. Ord 2006-223 (5-3-06)

Legend

Land Use
General Plan
Residential Single Family
Residential Multi Family
Business Old Town
Business Professional Office
Commercial Retail
Business Business Park
Business Limited Intensity
Mixed Use
Public Facilities: Institutional
Public Facilities: Recreational
Rural Residential
Rural Community
Open Space: Recreational
Open Space: Resource Protection
Urban Hillside
Urban Business
Urban Mixed Use
Non-Urban

City of Calabasas General Plan Update
Issue Paper on Open Space - Status & Alternatives

Figure 1
City of Calabasas

Source: City of Calabasas and Rincon Consultants, 2007.
Open Space Parcels Under Management Uncertainty

Source: City of Calabasas and Rincon Consultants, 2007.

City of Calabasas General Plan Update
Issue Paper on Open Space - Status & Alternatives

City Boundary
Open Space Parcels Under Management Uncertainty

Figure 3
Figure 4

City of Calabasas

*This includes OS-DR zoning, UC Reserve, and other miscellaneous public land.

Source: City of Calabasas, 2007.
City of Calabasas General Plan Update
Issue Paper on Open Space - Status & Alternatives

Figure 5
Hillside Mountainous Designated Areas

Source: City of Calabasas and Rincon Consultants, 2007.