



July 22, 2016

CHERYL ESSEX
NORTHER SERVICE CENTER
PROJECT LEAD
ONE CAPITOL MALL
SUITE 410
SACRAMENTO CA 95814

RE: Auburn State Recreation Area
General Plan/Resource Management Plan

Dear Ms. Essex,

PARC earlier (January 15, 2016 letter) submitted comments regarding issues we believe should be addressed in the planning process for the new Auburn SRA GP/RMP. We now submit the following additional comments for consideration in that same planning process, consisting of more specific proposals for guiding the future recreational use and development of the China Bar area of the Auburn SRA.

Public Access

As you know, China Bar is the location of the former Auburn Dam construction site. In 2000 the Bureau of Reclamation agreed to close the Auburn Dam diversion tunnel and restore the North Fork American River to its dewatered river channel at China Bar as part of the Placer County Water Agency pump station project. Central to that decision was a recognition that California law compelled restoring the public's ability to use this part of the river for recreational purposes.

In 2007 the Auburn Dam diversion tunnel was closed and the river returned to its reconstructed river channel. A five mile stretch of the river that had been closed to recreational boating for more than 40 years was subsequently re-opened for public use in 2008. The pump station project featured a number of recreational enhancements, including man-made rapids in the reconstructed river channel, a concrete riverside path for the use of boaters interested in repeat runs down the rapids course, and boater take-outs at China Bar and Oregon Bar. It also included the creation of a paved parking lot at the former "batch plant" above China Bar and

Oregon Bar, improvements to the road leading to Oregon Bar, smaller parking areas closer to the two take-out locations, a new trail from the paved parking lot down to Oregon Bar, restrooms, and the installation of wooden post and cable “guardrails” in many places along the paved China Bar access road leading into the canyon from Maidu Drive in Auburn.

These improvements were all intended to facilitate the safe and convenient recreational use of the China Bar area by Auburn SRA visitors, and were supported by recreational user groups looking forward to improved access. Unfortunately, vehicular access has proven to be much more limited than anticipated. Management policy has been to open the paved Maidu Drive China Bar access road only on weekends and holidays during the summer months (June through September). The remainder of the time the gate at Maidu Drive is closed. Additionally, the paved access road leading toward China Bar from Cool, on the El Dorado County side of the river, is never open to public vehicular use.

In our view these roads should be open to the motoring public on a greatly expanded basis. Trail use in Auburn SRA and other Sierra foothill parks has mushroomed in recent years, with hikers, trail runners, mountain bikers and equestrians all searching for accessible scenic trails they can utilize. Recreational use of the Auburn SRA continues to grow, with the Confluence area often reaching its vehicle capacity on weekends, when traffic tends to back up on Highway 49 as motorists jockey for the few available parking spaces. Not far from Auburn SRA, Placer County’s Hidden Falls Preserve parking lots are also often filled beyond capacity, with vehicles parked for considerable distances along the approach roads to the preserve.

China Bar, and the paved roads leading to it, can and should offer visitors an alternative destination that can be easily accessed by vehicle while offering ready access to the many trails in the China Bar area. While expanding China Bar access will likely require modest additional operational expenditures, we believe the public benefits more than justify that investment. We also suspect that China Bar parking fees will cover much of the added costs, along with additional revenue from a new equestrian staging area and a proposed environmental campground.

Recreational Bridge

We believe it is time to deliver on the promise of a multi-use trail bridge spanning the North Fork of the American River at China Bar. Such a bridge would greatly enhance recreational opportunities for China Bar trail users, creating a key connection between the network of trails on either side of the river.

Prior to the closure of the Auburn Dam diversion tunnel, there was a land bridge across the dewatered river channel that provided this vital link. The pump station project’s EIS/EIR recognized that one unfortunate consequence of the project would be the loss of this “Auburn to Cool Trail” land bridge through the dewatered river channel. While not proposed as part of the pump station project, the EIS/EIR did call for the construction of a trail bridge to mitigate the impact of the loss of this vital trail link and to restore its trail connectivity function. In

recognition of their respective shares of responsibility for the severing of the Auburn to Cool Trail, State Parks committed one million dollars and PCWA a half million dollars to the cost of constructing the bridge.

In 2007 State Parks completed a bridge feasibility study that identified several potential bridge construction sites. The proposed bridge project has languished since that time, ostensibly because of funding challenges presented by estimated construction costs.

In our view there is a compelling need to complete this bridge project. Given the growing popularity of Auburn SRA trails, the proposed bridge would provide tremendous value by opening up more trail options and relieving pressure on currently heavily used trails. The need for a multi-use river crossing linking Auburn trails with Cool-Knickerbocker area trails is particularly acute, since there is no other multi-use river crossing connecting these two trail networks anywhere in the Auburn SRA (Mountain Quarries Railroad Bridge, aka “No Hands Bridge,” is not open to mountain bikers).

The bridge would also serve as a draw for those trail users who choose to utilize the large parking lot at American River Overlook Park in Auburn. Existing trails lead down to China Bar from Overlook Park, which is managed by the Auburn Area Recreation and Park District (“ARD”). ARD is currently developing plans for substantial improvements to the park, including a new paved pathway with connections to existing trails, extensive landscaping, public art, and a viewing platform on the edge of the canyon looking down toward China Bar.

Both the Auburn and Cool economies benefit greatly from trail use in the Auburn SRA. An ever-increasing number of competitive trail events use these trails, including the legendary Western States 100 Mile Run and Tevis Cup 100 Mile Equestrian Ride, and in March of this year approximately 1,000 runners participated in the Way Too Cool Footrace. Completion of the Auburn to Cool Trail Bridge would allow event organizers to create new race routes utilizing the river crossing, leading to even greater local economic benefits and increased public use of the currently under-utilized China Bar area.

We urge State Parks and the Bureau of Reclamation to address the China Bar access issues outlined above and to renew their commitment to construction of a trail bridge at China Bar.

We believe the best location for the proposed bridge is the site identified in the 2007 Auburn to Cool Trail Crossing Feasibility Study as the “***Upper Outlet Rapid site***” (at page 35 of that study). This location is downstream of the former dam construction area’s diversion tunnel outlet and is near the Folsom SRA/Auburn SRA boundary (but technically within Folsom SRA). Relatively short new trail segments would need to be constructed to connect the bridge to existing trails and roads on both sides of the river within Auburn SRA. Utilizing the existing former dam infrastructure will preserve pristine canyon lands further downstream and save time and money during construction.

We believe the bridge should be designed for multiple use by hikers, runners, equestrians and mountain bikers. We also believe the bridge should be designed to be capable of safely conveying emergency vehicles; such a design would have obvious benefits by providing additional access options for reaching both sides of the canyon during emergency situations.

As noted, siting the bridge at the Upper Outlet Rapid will require construction of additional short trail segments to connect the bridge to the existing trail networks on both sides of the river. Those new trail segments should be designed to accommodate safe use by all trail user groups as well as emergency vehicles. We have invested time in carefully plotting out recommended trail connection routes to the bridge, consulting with multiple user groups to gain consensus on trail usage, safety guidelines, bridge etiquette and clear user signage. See "China Bar Bridge and Trail Map" and related illustrations attached.

Additionally, recreational enhancement features we believe should be part of China Bar improvements include (see "China Bar Bridge and Trail Map" and related illustrations):

MAP "A" American River Overlook

- Install trail map panel and signage to China Bar Bridge
- Extend trail from equestrian staging area at Overlook Park by clearing a four foot wide dirt path adjacent to the Pleasant Avenue trail pavement in order to create safe footing for horses
- Shade structures, picnic tables, and bear-proof garbage receptacles (as per ARD planned improvements)

MAP "B" Picnic Promontory

- Shade structures, picnic tables, and bear-proof garbage receptacle
- Historic signage: Native American, Gold Rush, Auburn Dam and natural history panels
- Improved fencing
- Concrete access stairs built from road above promontory (designated as a mountain bike/pedestrian trail) to allow safe access to the promontory site.

MAP "C" New bike trail to allow safe approach to bridge

MAP "D" Equestrian staging area and overnight campground for horses

(See Illustration D "Equestrian Staging Area" and map location "D")

Replaces the staging area lost when the parking area at the Maidu entrance gate was paved as part of the pump station project. Safely removes horse trailers and horses from proposed bike park area on Maidu Road.

- Remove and clear core sample site.
- Fill pit with excavated material from bridge construction.
- Grade parking area
- Install four steel rail paddocks, a water tank with trough and portable toilet

MAP "E" Oregon Hill Parking/ Maidu Environmental Campground

(see map and "Maidu Environmental Campground" illustration)

- Amphitheater for ASRA interpretive talks to students and other groups
- Shade structures, picnic tables, sand volleyball court, horseshoe pit
- Several ADA accessible camp sites
- Improved fencing, landscaping and signage at ponds

MAP "F" Rocky Island Bar improvements (see "Opportunity Overview" illustration)

- Shade structures, picnic tables, and bear-proof garbage receptacles at strategic locations
- An unpaved riverside parking area on the El Dorado County side of the river, at Rocky Island Bar adjacent to China Bar, to be located at the terminus of the Salt Creek Trail access road leading into the canyon from behind the fire station along Highway 49 in Cool
- A bathroom with solar roof panels to be located adjacent to this new unpaved parking area . Panels would enable electricity for public events at China Bar.
- New trail with safe approach to bridge for all users

MAP "G" New equestrian trail connector

- Build short new trail connection from end of road to existing multi-use trail to avoid horse traffic on downhill paved slope.
- Clear 4 foot wide foot path adjacent to pavement for safe footing for horses.

MAP "H" Improved dedicated bike and pedestrian trail

- Existing infrastructure road is overgrown and needs brush cleared to be ready for use.

Sincerely,

Tim Woodall
Board President

Attachments:

China Bar Bridge and Trail Map
Connection Overview Illustration
Opportunity Overview Illustration
Equestrian Staging Area Illustration (map site D)
Maidu Environmental Campground Illustration (map site E)