



Summary Report  
District Surplus Lands Workshop  
July 22, 2010

Sweetwater Springs Water District held a public workshop at 6:30 pm on July 22 at the Monte Rio Community Center, 20488 Highway 116, Monte Rio, 95446, to inform the public about the District's strategy for its surplus lands and to get feedback and proposals in an informal setting that invites a community discussion.

The Meeting started out with a short public comment period and then the District General Manager, Steve Mack, gave a short introductory presentation with the following information: the District has approximately 900 acres of larger parcels that currently are undeveloped open space. 404 acres are in 4 parcels in the Mount Jackson area (northeast of Rio Nido), 94 acres are in 3 parcels west of Old Cazadero Road (north of Guernewood Park), and 384 acres are in 4 parcels south of the Monte Rio Terraces. These parcels are wooded, have some mostly unmaintained trails and roads, and are on steep slopes and at higher elevations. Historically, the parcels were the source watershed for District owned springs, but the District does not supply water from these springs now and has no plans to do so in the foreseeable future.

One of the District's surplus lands goals is to keep those parcels in open space by transferring the parcels to a more appropriate open space management agency or organization. This presentation was followed by a question and answer period on the presentation.

Ken Wells, representing the Monte Rio Recreation and Park District (MRR&PD) gave a presentation on a proposal that the Sweetwater Springs Water District transfer the two large parcels south of Monte Rio identified as surplus lands (APN's 097-130-010 and 011) to create a public park with trails. The MRR&PD proposal is being supported by the Sonoma County Trails Council, the Sonoma County Horse Council, and the Backcountry Horsemen - North Bay Unit, which together have the expertise and resources to help MRR&PD accomplish this goal. This idea would also require an easement for trails through the SSWD's Schoolhouse Gulch property (APN 096-010-001) in order to link the acquired park property with the old Monte Rio school site, which would be developed by MRR&PD into a trailhead for the new park. The proposers of this idea believe it has the potential to create a new economic driver for the community based on recreational users visiting the community to use the trails in this new park. The potential also exists for Monte Rio and this park to be the hub of a regional trail system connecting this 'Monte Rio Mountain Park' with the neighboring Sonoma Beach State Park, and Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District and Sonoma Land Trust protected lands.

The meeting was then opened up for questions and comments from the audience. Issues and opinions from the comment periods included:

- District lands are part of the original purchase of the District and should not be given away. Revenue from sale of property should be used be restricted to paying off the bond that was used to purchase the District.
- The Board focus in this effort has moved from obtaining revenue to appropriate land management.
- The watershed values of the District lands are important for the region and must not be compromised.
- Lands were originally obtained as water sources for the District and should be retained for that possible use in the future.
- The process is moving too quickly and much more information is needed on these parcels including environmental features and values, and fair market value. Slow down the process so that other proposals can surface. Look for grant opportunities to develop more information.
- Many comments of support for the concept of a regional park for multiple recreational purposes – hiking, biking, and equestrian.
- Many local agencies and organization are experienced and willing for trail construction and maintenance.
- Monte Rio Recreation and Park District has not demonstrated competency to manage these lands
- Lands should be managed to reduce fire hazard and ensure a healthy forest and the environmental values that brings.
- Lands should be opened up/managed for more availability for public uses.
- Fire hazard is present; some level of management and/or insurance could be done cost effectively.
- Make certain of guarantees that lands will be used for public purposes if transferred. Many comments about transferring the lands and what rights would be transferred – conservation easements, water rights, timber harvesting rights, etc.
- Economic opportunities if lands managed for equestrian, hiking, and cycling purposes.
- Make certain new uses – trails for biking, in particular, do not damage watershed values.
- Have more public meetings on this before any action is taken. Have a public workshop in Guerneville.

Questions and Answers:

Q: How can we be certain that the District won't need these lands for water supply purposes in the future?

A: The District's current approach to obtaining water – wells near the Russian River - develop more than enough water for current and anticipated demand. Use of spring water or surface from local creeks would require meeting surface water treatment rules which, among other requirements, involve approved water treatment facilities prior to delivery to customers and would be cost prohibitive.

Q: What if District sells/transfers land to agency or organization and that agency/organization then sells it for another purpose?

A: Transfer can be structured so that if the receiving agency does not follow through with conditions of sale it reverts to the District. Another approach could be to limit sale to conservation easements or other elements of property rights that limit use to a regional park, for example, and the District would retain other property rights.

Q: Are the parcels contiguous with any existing regional parks?

A: No, but one edge of the parcels behind the Monte Rio Terraces are close to Sonoma State Park.

Q: Don't the ratepayers own the land?

A: No, the land is owned by the Water District but the Directors of the Board do represent the voters in the Water District, many of whom are ratepayers and who do get to vote for directors.

Board Member Comments:

- Many thanks for the attendance and comments.
- Mission of Sweetwater Springs Water District is delivering potable water to its customers; these lands do not fit with this mission.
- The Water District is not a land management agency; perhaps there is a better way to manage the larger parcels and the District is exploring that.
- Revenue from the sale of these lands is important.
- Process will continue to include public input and any transfer of the larger parcels will not happen quickly.

The meeting started at approximately 6:35 and adjourned at 8:07.