

Fine-tuning the Claremont Wilderness Park Master Plan

by Lissa Petersen, President, Claremont Wildlands Conservancy Board

Viewpoint, 6 November 2015

Speaking for the Board of Claremont Wildlands Conservancy (CWC), I'd like to commend the city council, staff and consultants for their impressive work in crafting a draft of the master plan for the Claremont Hills Wilderness Park that will guide its management over the next 20 years. We strongly support most of the recommendations in the draft as well as its guiding principles: preservation, access, stewardship, education and public engagement. We also support the draft's three primary goals: to preserve the park as an environmental resource; to manage it for "passive recreational uses" (hiking, biking, horseback-riding); and to minimize negative impacts on park neighbors.

Because of the significant and controversial increase in park visitors over the past five years, these goals appear to be in conflict: access vs. preservation, and access vs. welfare of neighbors. The city's consultants estimate 300,000 to 500,000 visits per year, with 85 percent repeat visitors and 80 percent entering at Mills Avenue to use "the loop" trail, which begins and ends there. The loop and the park's other main trails are wide LA County fire roads, built to handle massive equipment.

If we see these large visitor numbers as an asset rather than a problem, we may find some reasonable solutions to the perceived conflicts. After all, the fees these visitors pay, totaling almost \$450,000 last year, are the primary source of funding for managing the park.

Furthermore, the park's regional attraction helps Claremont win outside grants. Of the nearly \$20 million that has been spent on expanding the original park since 1996, approximately 40 percent came from state and regional sources. And not only do visitors love the park and improve their own health, they become future advocates for its preservation.

Under the principle of stewardship, the draft treats these park visitors as troublemakers to be controlled: "Users shall not negatively impact wildlife and surrounding properties." Instead, the large cadre of repeat visitors may be seen as potential stewards, who will promote a healthy park culture of respect for nature, fellow visitors, neighbors and the community.

One common concern some Claremonters have raised about the thousands of visitors is that they are damaging the park. However, the city's environmental consultants for the master plan found the park's biological and cultural resources to be in good condition: "visitor impacts were considered minimal." These visitors tend to stay on the wide fire roads, which can easily accommodate them.

Another concern is that trails are annoyingly clogged. But in surveys during the summer of 2014 of over 2000 park visitors, 93 percent indicated that the number of other visitors did not negatively impact their experience. Many wrote enthusiastic notes saying how much they loved walking the loop.

The final concern is parking, and it's a serious one. The two lots at Mills have 177 spaces. Parking on most neighboring streets is now restricted for residents only, and the draft plan proposes extending the restrictions. The lots are adequate to meet demand except from 6 to 10 a.m. on Saturdays and Sundays. The draft plan proposes raising fees as the solution: from the current \$3 for four hours to \$5; from \$3 during peak periods to \$10; and from \$100 for an annual car permit to \$140.

Because the CWC supports the need to balance the three primary goals of the master plan, and because one of our two goals is to advocate for recreational access, we oppose the proposal to raise fees.

The raise may produce the unintended consequences of driving visitors away, thereby reducing park revenues, or giving them the incentive to park on other Claremont streets near other park entrances. We advocate a better solution: to provide adequate overflow parking for peak periods in spaces adjacent to the current lots.

The CWC's other primary goal is to expand the park. We envision a grand, cohesive wilderness park that preserves Claremont's hillsides from its eastern to western borders. Currently, the park includes 2000 acres, but about 800 acres of our hillsides remain in private hands. Outstanding development credits allow for building about 110 new housing units on these lands.

On this issue, we believe the city's draft plan is rooted in the present and needs greater vision for the next 20 years. It briefly acknowledges the value of enlarging the park to preserve more of the hillsides from development; however, expansion is not included as a goal or even a "desired outcome." It must be!

In our view, three other critical issues need attention as the plan is being revised.

First, the draft ignores the perspective of the park as one part of an extended wildlands corridor along the San Gabriel foothills. This broader vision involves building a strong network with neighboring communities and with nonprofit and governmental agencies to find solutions that expand and link wilderness areas while balancing recreational access and preservation.