



The State of The Trail, December 2017

A Personal Message to
the Petaluma Public
by Susan Starbird, volunteer

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Introduction

Petaluma Water Ways is a dream of an interlinked, interconnected network of waterfront trail and river access sites for the benefit of generations ahead. It's also a reality: it is a city-council-adopted, 2013 addendum to the 1996 Petaluma River Access and Enhancement Plan, to which city staff and many community and nonprofit volunteers contributed.

This is a message from me, one of those volunteers, to future leaders of the Petaluma Water Ways initiative for next year, next decade, and the next century.

My report reflects only my personal opinion about the opportunities and urgency of Petaluma Water Ways development. Neither the City of Petaluma or members of the Petaluma River Access Partnership, which developed the Petaluma Water Ways concept during the mid 2000s, previewed this status "snapshot" and its proposals.

The three sections of my report – introduction, catalogue, and conclusion – reflect the flow of information I believe unfamiliar readers need to "grok" the breadth, ambition, and complexity of the Petaluma Water Ways vision. I hope you'll take a look at the map, "portfolio" pages, and individual project descriptions, to get a sense of the network's synergy. Only at the end, after the big picture, come my recommendations.

Potential Impact

Is Petaluma Water Ways a recreation asset or an economic development investment? It's both, as well as being the access complement to environmental enhancement.¹

That a waterfront trail with water access points is an economic boon to a community is obvious to travelers to communities that invested in river access hundreds of years ago (e.g., the esplanades of European capitals) or recently (e.g., Napa, American River Parkway). But where's the data?

The economic benefit has been abundantly demonstrated, in growth in property valuation, tourism, sales revenues, and other benefits. How many capital investments can cities claim to achieve all this, at the same time reducing environmental impacts and improving residents' health? Future leaders who wish to dig deeply into the

¹ Funding for environmental repair or enhancement is easier to locate and obtain than public funding for recreation amenities. But environmental projects can result in limiting public access. Inspired by progress made over more than 20 years by advocates and agencies aligned with the San Francisco Bay Water Trail, Petaluma Water Ways focuses on the recreational aspects of the River Access and Enhancement Plan, and leaves environmental projects to allied organizations and agencies.

economic potential of Petaluma Water Ways can start by exploring the 130 reports archived by Headwaters Economics at <https://headwaterseconomics.org/trail/>.

Promising Developments

Several events transpired since Petaluma Water Ways was adopted. Two major improvements to benefit cyclists and pedestrians were the opening of Copeland Crossing bridge and construction of a railroad underpass near Highway 101.

The following positive developments are in the works, but river access advocates should not assume they can relax, as not all elements are locked in as of this writing.

North Water Street Apartments may open up access between upstream reaches and the Lynch Creek Trail and Copeland Crossing (Project 1), and provide impetus for connecting a waterfront path to the Washington Street Gateway (Project 3).

Haystack Pacifica on Weller Street may offer small craft storage to residents.

Rotary Clubs have reserved funding and personpower to improve the pocket park at the end of C Street (Project 12).

Petaluma Small Craft Center's "Floathouse" rental site in the Turning Basin was approved by the city and includes construction of a public bathroom in Cavanagh Landing Park (Project 9A).

Friends of the Petaluma River is raising funds to improve docks at Steamer Landing Park (Project 16).

The Northbank at Riverfront development includes a waterfront greenway and site for PSCC's community boathouse, currently in design (Projects 25 and 25A). Future development of the adjacent Pomeroy site will, hopefully, extend the greenway and link its paths to bikeways and pedestrian routes toward downtown.

A railroad underpass between Northbank and the Marina will accommodate bike-pedestrian access along the waterfront (Project 28).

Note that many of the above developments, while in planning at the time of this writing, are long-term projects reliant on private-sector investment, and therefore subject to changing market forces.

Threats

Several threats conspire to block the vision of the River Access and Enhancement Plan. These include:

- Lack of public investment

- Grassroots inattention or inertia
- Reliance on private development for public improvements
- Diversion of development mitigation funds to non-river-oriented projects
- Declining institutional knowledge
- Unforeseen emergencies

Decades of shrinking public investment and cyclical recessions have taken a special toll on Petaluma, and no end is in sight.

Petaluma voters defeated a 2012 measure to pass a park improvement tax.

Also in 2012, abolition of the state's redevelopment agencies dashed hopes for that form of reinvestment. Redevelopment monies were seen as a route to paying off the city's debt to the California Department of Boating and Waterways (DBW) for the Marina. Third parties have whispered that both the DBW and the California Coastal Conservancy, historically one of Sonoma County's prime investors in community access projects, are holding back future support to the City until the Marina debt is retired, but I leave it to the next generation of leadership to substantiate this directly with the state, and, if it's true, to pursue a remedy.

The River Access Plan's strategy was to rely on developers of the waterfront to construct the improvements that together constitute Petaluma Water Ways. The downside of this strategy is creation of isolated, "landlocked" fragments (for example, McNear Landing Park, Project 24). Further, when improvements are constructed by commercial or nonprofit, private developers — altruistic and community-minded as some developers can be — sites can be technically public but functionally private because they are costly to access, non-ADA-compliant, lack parking, are overlaid by automobile access, require special permissions or keys, or even have "private property" signs on public easements. Examples of all these instances can be found in our community.

Developer's mitigation fees go into the city's general fund; sometimes with earmarks for Petaluma Water Ways-related improvements. Earmarks are not binding, and the lag time can be long between a builder's pledge and delivery of the funds. Petaluma's priority in recent years has been to apply parks monies to ballfield development, away from the river. Even when the development is on or near the river.

At the time of this writing, a solution to the dredging crisis is not yet in sight, and the D Street Bridge was frozen in the down position for a number of weeks this fall and winter. These two emergencies are likely to have considerable economic impact, although hard data may elude us.

Key elements of the recreation vision of Petaluma Water Ways are connections to regional trail networks (Bay Trail, Ridge Trail, etc.), including the San Francisco Bay Water Trail. Petaluma's Marina and Turning Basin are two mapped destinations for small craft coming from the Bay and Delta. If yachts and smaller boats cannot get under the SMART railroad bridge (clearance 3' at high tide) or under the D Street

Bridge, and cannot navigate in the Marina or to the Turning Basin at low tide, the economic benefits promised by regional interconnectivity will be lost. Because these benefits have never been quantified, no one knows the extent of the loss.

Private volunteerism has been a promising solution for implementing small improvement projects. But it depends on leadership by community nonprofits for mobilization, resource acquisition, and construction. This strategy produced modest improvements at the ends of G and H Streets (Projects 18 and 19), but appears to have stalled at C Street (Project 12).

Institutionalized knowledge of the River Access Plan within the city, among the media, and in the community declines over time as the people who generated the River Access Plan and worked on its implementation retire or withdraw from public engagement. While in the process of developing the Petaluma Water Ways concept, staff members Pamela Tuft and Erica Ahmann Smithies left the city, taking their backgrounds with them. The flight continues.²

It's ironic (also poignant) that some of the loudest, most perseverant river access advocates come from outside Petaluma. We are attracted here by the river itself, which with its urban waterfront commerce, year-round navigability, and proximity to the Bay Area is unique in Sonoma County. I hope this paper will assist the next generation of Petaluma Water Ways torchbearers to use their status as residents and voters to infiltrate committees, badger the media and elected officials, gain committee and commission appointments, achieve elected office, and weld crucial bonds at the local, regional, state, and federal levels. Otherwise, when this generation of supporters moves on, who will advocate for the big picture of interconnected river access?

What Should Be Done?

The general public and city officials must be vigilant to assure implementation of the Petaluma River Access and Enhancement Plan that gave birth to Petaluma Water Ways. Instead of a fragmented approach reliant on the will of individual property owners, a more efficient approach could be a multi-organizational stakeholder coalition with a broad and collective perspective to watchdog implementation of Petaluma Water Ways' unified network.

The choice is our community's. Hopefully my report will inspire and inform today's and tomorrow's leaders of Petaluma Water Ways. Please read the next section to see the impressive array of projects comprising Petaluma Water Ways, and, lastly, to consider my recommendations in the Conclusion.

² Most recently with the departure of Larry Zimmer and Scott Duiven

Portfolios and Catalogue Pages

(Available at petalumawaterways.org.³ Links selected here are limited to the most essential for leaders wanting to quickly grasp the full scope of the initiative.)

Map:

2016 map update: <http://www.cityofpetaluma.net/parksnrec/pdf/MAP.FINAL-large-file-size.pdf>

Portfolios:

Water Trail elements:

<http://www.cityofpetaluma.net/parksnrec/pdf/WaterTrailPortfolio2012.pdf>

Land trail connectors:

<http://www.cityofpetaluma.net/parksnrec/pdf/InterwovenConnectionsPortfolio2012.pdf>

Greenspaces and gathering places:

<http://www.cityofpetaluma.net/parksnrec/pdf/TownCommonsPortfolio2012.pdf>

Wayfinding and navigational aids:

<http://www.cityofpetaluma.net/parksnrec/pdf/WayfindingPortfolio2016.pdf>

Projects

Three projects along North Water Street:

<http://www.cityofpetaluma.net/parksnrec/northwaterstreet.html>

Three projects along Water Street:

<http://www.cityofpetaluma.net/parksnrec/waterstreet.html>

Seven projects around the Turning Basin:

<http://www.cityofpetaluma.net/parksnrec/turningbasin.html>

Five projects in the Warehouse District:

<http://www.cityofpetaluma.net/parksnrec/warehousedistrict.html>

Four projects on McNear Peninsula:

<http://www.cityofpetaluma.net/parksnrec/mcnearpenninsula.html>

³ I cannot guarantee these links will remain live. Best to navigate online to the areas and pages sought.

Six projects between Thompson Creek and Highway 101:
<http://www.cityofpetaluma.net/parksnrec/downstream.html>

Three projects around the Marina:
<http://www.cityofpetaluma.net/parksnrec/marinareach.html>

Four projects downstream of the Marina:
<http://www.cityofpetaluma.net/parksnrec/almanshollenberger.html>

Public-private partnership:

How local groups can initiate improvement projects:
<http://www.cityofpetaluma.net/parksnrec/pdf/AdoptAProject.pdf>

Conclusion

Collective activism by community members will assure that the City implements the Petaluma River Access and Enhancement Plan that gave birth to Petaluma Water Ways.

Some of the tasks facing the community in implementing Petaluma Water Ways are small but have a cumulative positive effect. Others are complex, sometimes daunting. But if the community does not rededicate itself to river access every day, forever, when will this work get done?

Proposal: Form an Action Committee

A broad-based, multi-organizational stakeholder action coalition could watchdog implementation of the Petaluma River Access and Enhancement Plan. This group would be dedicated to the city-wide Petaluma Water Ways effort (of which individual projects are elements but not the whole). Among the tasks facing leaders of this movement are:

1. *Sustain institutional knowledge.* Every new wave of leaders among elected officials, city staff, the media, and the community requires outreach and education to understand the significance of Petaluma Water Ways for future generations.
2. *Broadcast news.* Ignorance of Petaluma Water Ways and/or perception that nothing is happening on the waterfront leads to proliferation of fragmented efforts that sometimes complement, sometimes confuse the issues involved.
3. *Develop mutual priorities.* Absent of unifying leadership of the Petaluma Water Ways initiative, various stakeholder groups find themselves competing for support and resources to construct their own projects.
4. *Cultivate activists representative of the user population.* Youth, voters, young families, people of color, other stakeholder populations, and yes, politicians, should participate in and lead the advocacy group.
5. *Unify and suppress fragmentation.* Many of the numbered projects are landmarks and have their champions; more are "orphans" without champions; and many of the links between projects are yet to be defined. In this group, individual project alliances will be secondary to the systemwide vision.
6. *Get help from the National Park Service.* Current and new local leadership may find that the Rivers, Trails, and Conservation Assistance program that got Petaluma Water Ways off the ground has resources to lend to revitalization of our initiative.

If this effort were effective,

- The community will demand rapid completion of the pedestrian-and-bike-friendly, interconnected waterfront trail and river access network.
- It will be easier to raise funds, pursue grants, and mobilize volunteers for action.
- Elected officials, city staff, and regional agencies will prioritize Petaluma Water Ways on the public's behalf, and increase their support.
- Grantseeking and holistic design will integrate solutions by area, versus isolated spot developments only linkable by car.

Proposal: Protect The Brand

A brand with no leadership to sustain and promote it is at risk. The brand needs more representation at City Hall.

7. *Use the brand.* River-related signage, construction contracts, press releases, maps, and other official communications relating to river access should name Petaluma Water Ways.
8. *Educate newcomers.* New City staff/elected officials/appointees are often unfamiliar with Petaluma Water Ways and its projects due to turnover or changed assignments within City departments and committees. Newcomers need to understand that Petaluma Water Ways is a *city* undertaking.
9. *Unify plans.* Reconcile Petaluma Water Ways projects with transportation, park priorities, public art, dredging, and other City plans and initiatives.

If this effort were effective,

- Petaluma Water Ways will count among its leaders members of the City's Planning, Public Works, Economic Development, and other departments.
- All Petaluma River trail signs will reflect the Petaluma Water Ways brand.
- Internal and external spokespeople for riverfront projects will refer to the trail network as "Petaluma Water Ways" in written and oral communications.
- Developers of riverfront projects (initiated by private groups or public agencies) will incorporate Petaluma Water Ways in their planning, and coordinate with Petaluma Water Ways on joint initiatives.
- Petaluma Water Ways is reconciled with City planning maps and other strategy documents.
- Petaluma Water Ways signage will be maintained throughout the land- and water-trail network.

Proposal: Integrate The General Plan, the Bicycle-Pedestrian Plan, and Petaluma Water Ways

When the Bicycle and Pedestrian Master Plan is updated, the sites of Petaluma Water Ways should be incorporated so that the routes connecting them to each other are marked and have a chance at increasing construction priority. This plan, in turn, will be absorbed into the General Plan.

Proposal: Expand Petaluma Water Ways throughout the City

Petaluma Water Ways as conceived in 2011 included only the most central sections of the river. Now is the time to stretch the boundaries to include the river from the north city limits to the south city limits. This means adopting new projects and integrating “orphan” projects (those that have no obvious advocates) into the Petaluma Water Ways map. This effort would enfold the entire river into the Petaluma Water Ways brand, add orphan projects to Petaluma Water Ways, and define them as sites that community advocacy groups can adopt.

Potential new inclusions that should be reviewed immediately include:

- The Marina
- Hopper Street between Steamer Landing Park and Caulfield Lane.
- The riverfront between the north city limits (Denman Reach?) to the Lynch Creek Trail or North Water Street (Copeland Crossing, Project 1)
- The riverfront downstream of Shollenberger Park, to include Ellis Creek to the south city limits.

Success in this effort would be evident when

- Branding and holistic landscape design better emphasize that Petaluma Water Ways is a continuous interlinked network.
- Added projects have their own detailed descriptions and designs.
- The map & website is updated.
- Grassroots advocates champion these sites.

Parting Words

Many city staff members and members of the public have invested a great deal of effort in making Petaluma Water Ways a reality. The importance of these efforts

cannot and should not be diminished. And efforts continue unabated on a number of fronts, as is evident in the section on Promising Developments.

Government cannot move fast, but developers can and do. The risk our waterfront will be given over to private interests, with resulting privatization of access, is always there, and pressure grows with greater economic incentives.

Citizens must act collaboratively, aggressively, and (most important) continuously to protect and preserve public access to our river. If we don't protect our access, who will? If we don't act now in the interests of future generations, when will we?