

Feather River Parkway - interim planning summary

APRIL 2022

This document describes planning to date for the southern part of the Feather River Parkway in Sutter County, CA, adjacent to incorporated Yuba City, consisting of 3 miles of riverfront property. It is a summary for the purposes of reviewing progress with key project stakeholders, developing an application for grant funding to begin some improvement work on site, and determining next steps in planning and implementation.

PROJECT OVERVIEW

Site and context description

The 231 acre project area extends along the west side of the Feather River, including the levee and lands between the levee and the river, between Yuba City Boat Launch and the south end of Shanghai Bend. The land is owned by Sutter County and California Department of Fish and Wildlife – see map on the following page. The levee is managed and maintained by Sutter County Levee District 1.

In 2002, a strategic plan for the entire 790 acre Feather River Parkway area from Pease Road south to Shanghai Bend was developed for the City of Yuba City. Since then, recreational facilities have been developed along 559 acres within the city limits. The southernmost portions (231 acres) of the proposed parkway lie outside city limits under the jurisdiction of Sutter County and have not been developed to date. This project seeks to plan for development of the remaining sections.

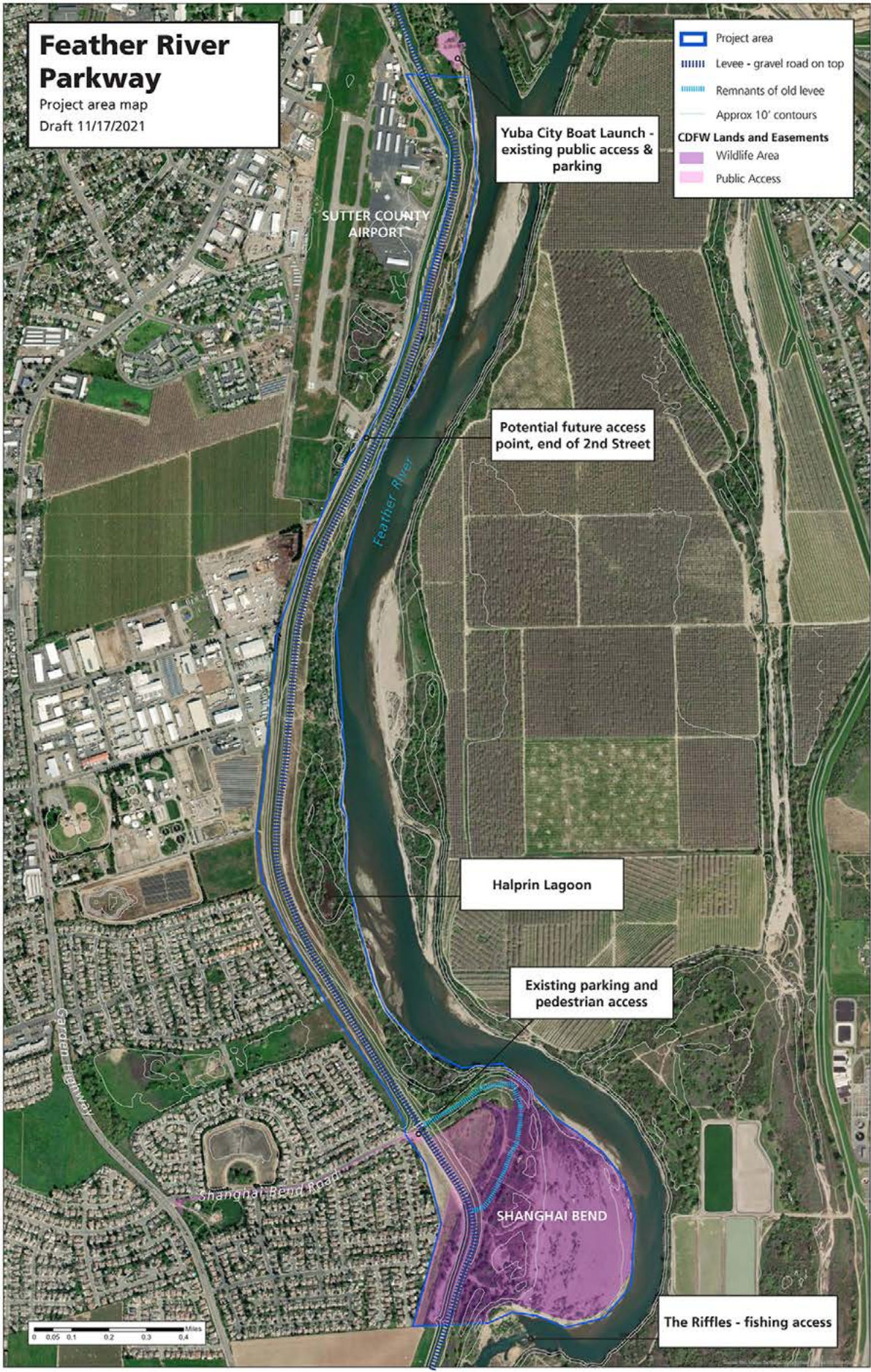
The main goal of the 2002 Strategic Plan was to utilize the land between the river and the levee by creating an attractive and active public parkway. The objectives included creating a safe and secure public place; creating an extensive river trail system for pedestrians and cyclists; to preserve natural areas and wildlife habitat; and to restore or “naturalize” areas to their former natural condition. Specifically, the plan envisioned the County-owned property, consisting of two distinct areas:

(1) Woodlands and Wetlands, consisting of approximately 106 acres remain in a relatively undisturbed state, with the addition of 3 miles of trails. This area is prime wildlife habitat and preservation was the main objective. A fitness trail and obstacle course were also planned.

(2) Shanghai Bend, consisting of 125 acres of mostly open space including an old levee and sand bar along the Feather River, was envisioned to have the same preservation objective as Woodland and Wetlands. The plan also envisioned 3 miles of trails that pass through the area with a minimum of disturbance.

While the objectives outlined in the strategic plan remain mostly relevant to current conditions, much has changed in the intervening years about local needs, expectations, levee protection standards, and what is realistic or legal to include in a parkway that lies on and within a major flood control structure. An update to this plan for the remaining Sutter County areas to reflect current conditions and community needs was suggested as preparation for implementing this part of the parkway.

In 2020, the Sutter County Resource Conservation District (RCD) began collaborating with Sutter County to restart development of the parkway. The RCD applied for planning assistance from the National Park Service’s Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance program (RTCA) in March of 2021. This assistance was awarded, and work with RTCA was kicked off in summer of 2021.



DRAFT VISION + GOALS

The working vision for the future of this part of the parkway is:

“The Feather River Parkway will be a safe, healthy, and welcoming place for the Yuba-Sutter community to enjoy the Feather River and the outdoors. It will offer educational and recreational opportunities and restored riparian habitat along the Feather River, from the Yuba City Boat Dock south to Shanghai Bend, for the enjoyment of current and future generations.”

There are three core elements to the initial plan to reach this vision:

Community safety and wellbeing: Create and sustain a public space that is welcoming and safe for all.

Ecological health: Protect and improve riparian landscape and wildlife habitat adaptable to variable water levels and environmental conditions, where people can experience and learn about the river and natural world.

Recreational access: Expand public use of the riverfront through development and maintenance of recreational facilities within the project area, and create connections to existing trails, nearby neighborhoods, and the rest of the Feather River Parkway.

Some initial actions to work toward these goals assembled from public and stakeholder input are outlined below, under “Initial Development Recommendations.” Detailed-level planning – including additional input from community members, stakeholders, and technical experts – will be needed ahead of beginning to implement some aspects of the project.

PLANNING PROCESS TO DATE

To date, community input about the project idea – including interests, desired qualities and uses in a future developed parkway, and concerns about

current or future conditions—has been gathered through an online survey, and a series of informal meetings between Sutter County RCD and various community organizations and stakeholder groups.

Informal meetings and presentations by Mike Johnston on behalf of Sutter County RCD

In summer and fall of 2021, Mike Johnston from the RCD made presentations to the local Kiwanis and Rotary clubs, the Sutter County Board of Supervisors, Yuba City Council Members, Yuba Sutter Chamber of Commerce, Yuba Sutter Farm Day, local bike and running clubs, local farmers associations, and nearby residents.

- Reaction to the idea of developing the remaining Sutter County sections of the parkway at these presentations was overwhelmingly positive. Many groups and/or individuals expressed interest in supporting the effort when specific needs could be identified.
- The main concern expressed in these meetings was safety – people wanted the parkway to be safe for their families to enjoy.
- A meeting was held in October with 2nd Street homeowners and residents to discuss a segment of the levee between the current project area and the Parkway within the city limits of Yuba City to the north. This section of the levee and riverfront is privately owned and is currently not used for recreation or open to the public. The levee within these properties is managed through easements. Although not directly part of the project area, this area is located between the project area and other developed areas of the parkway to the north. For now, there is an existing on-street route that can be used by bikes and pedestrians to connect, as an alternative to travelling on the levee top or other trail inside the levee. Most of the homeowners were supportive of the idea of an easement for public use, but not all, and so no consensus was reached at that meeting. The easement option will not be pursued further as part of this project.

Online survey

An online survey about the proposed parkway project hosted by Sutter County was open from September 30 – October 13, 2021, and received more than 200 responses. The survey was publicized primarily through social media channels from Sutter County and Sutter County RCD, and a community radio appearance by Mike Johnston on behalf of the RCD on October 1.

Survey questions were:

1. *When was the last time you visited Shanghai Bend?*

- In the last year
- 1-3 years ago
- 4-6 years ago
- More than 6 years ago

2. *What activities do you like to do, or have you done, on the Feather River?*

- Walking
- Hiking
- Biking
- Dog-walking
- Fishing
- Boating
- Canoe/kayak
- Picnicking/gathering with others
- Spending time in nature
- Watching birds or other wildlife
- Exercise
- Other: [Fill in the blank]

3. *What features or amenities would you like to see included in the project?*

- seating
- multi-use/paved trails
- soft-surface walking trails
- shade
- picnic tables
- group picnic areas/gazebo
- parking
- developed recreation (e.g. disc golf course, bike park)
- locations for bird/wildlife watching
- fitness trail w/ stations
- Other: [Fill in the blank]

4. *What are your concerns about the project?*

- Homelessness/illegal camping
- Impacts of a high water event
- Cost & lack of funding
- Other: [Fill in the blank]

5. *Where would you go to get information about the Feather River Parkway?*

- Website
- Facebook
- Instagram
- Email
- Mail
- Appeal-Democrat or other print media
- In-person meeting
- Other: [Fill in the blank]

6. *Do you have any other comments or suggestions about the future of this parkway area?*

Community interests

Responses to the survey suggested great community interest in the project area becoming a place where community members feel safe and comfortable enjoying mostly passive and sometimes solitary activities outside: experiencing nature, going for a walk, taking kids out to play by the river, or fishing. To the extent that respondents believed this to be achievable (see concerns below) there was broad support for parkway recreational development, riparian restoration and/or any action that could be taken by Sutter County, the RCD, and partners to create a feeling of safety and change the character of the project area at present. There was also general interest in restoring and/or protecting the natural qualities of the Parkway as a unique resource and opportunity to connect with nature. Many specific ideas about recreational amenities and activities were proposed, the most common being improved trails and some basic facilities supporting those trails, like parking, seating, and shade.

Community concerns

Concerns expressed in the survey focused heavily on the perception that the project area is unsafe to visit now, and dissatisfaction with lack of access to the river. Specific concerns included homeless encampments/illegal camping; encounters with people who may be using drugs or alcohol, experiencing mental health issues, or otherwise behaving dangerously or unpredictably; unleashed and feral dogs; garbage; and damage to parkway natural resources, particularly in recent fires. A few respondents were so upset or discouraged by the change in the area in the last 10-20 years that they expressed disbelief that positive change is possible, and/or weren't willing to propose any ideas about how they would like the project area to be in the future. There was also some concern expressed that even if change is made in the short term, it couldn't be maintained in the long term.

Take aways and next steps:

The survey and informal meetings confirmed broad (if not universal) support for a parkway development project and provided a foundation to outline a working vision and draft goals for the site, and identify potential first steps toward implementation, as well as further planning needs.

SITE EXISTING CONDITIONS

The site is a 3 mile long stretch of partially wooded riparian area located between the levee and the bank of the Feather River. Due to its location along a major river, public ownership, and restrictions on development within the levee, it has a mostly natural feel with mature trees and other riparian vegetation, and views of the river. It contains extensive social trails and old roadways, some of which are still used by Levee District 1 in levee maintenance. The levee top is surfaced in asphalt in some areas and gravel in others, and is gated to discourage use by motorized vehicles but can be used by pedestrians or bicyclists. Major features within the project area include the Sutter County Boat Dock; Halprin Lagoon; the remnants of a former levee at the north end of Shanghai Bend; and Shanghai Bend itself, including an expanse of sparsely vegetated sand along a bend in the river, formerly bounded at the downstream end by a natural rock ledge in the river called the Riffles, which collapsed in the early 2010s.

The site's location also means that it is subject to infrequent but significant flooding – as designed. At times, the entire project area excepting the upper parts of the levee can be underwater. Its current condition has also been impacted by a number of other factors including informal but semi-permanent structures built by unhoused people; dumping of refuse, including abandoned cars and other large items; and human-caused fires.

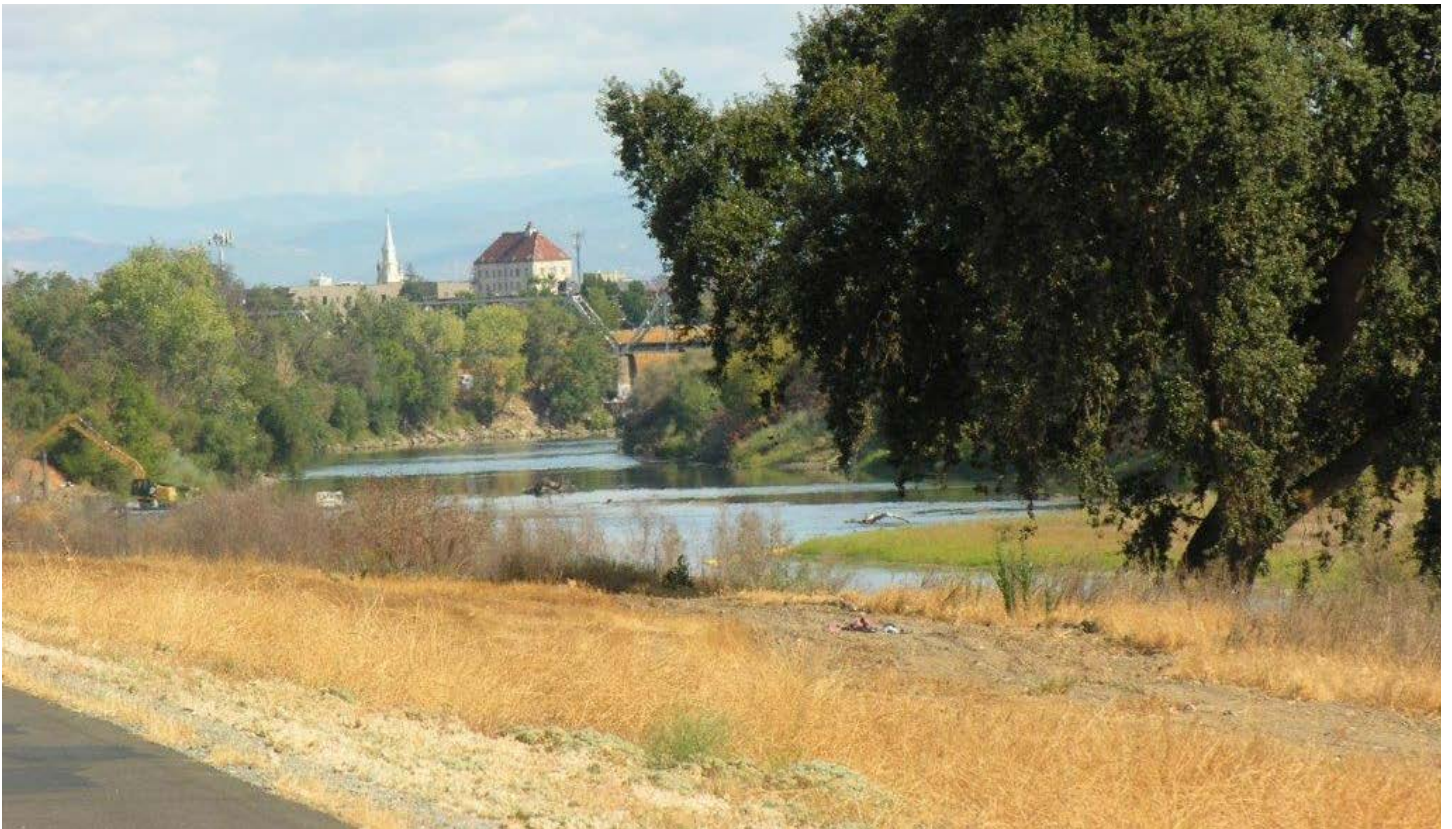
Its proximity to residential areas of Yuba City makes it an important opportunity for close to home recreation and contact with nature. While it can be used recreationally now, it is underutilized, due to past and ongoing impacts, public perceptions about safety, and limited facilities.



Current bike path on levee top looking north to Marysville



View from levee top towards river



Looking north from the levee top



Looking south from the levee top



Woodlands river view



Looking south from the levee top



Pelican with migrating terns with migrating Canadian geese on bank.



Social trail along the top of the old levee in the Shanghai Bend area



White Pelican, commonly found in this section of the Feather River



Marker for Halprin Lagoon



The Riffles area fishing access at the south edge of Shanghai Bend



Open river edge in Shanghai Bend



Social trails exist throughout the project area - some may be suitable for recreational use



Existing parking area at east end of Shanghai Bend Road

OPPORTUNITIES + CHALLENGES

Levees and floodway

Sutter County has sustained numerous floods, including the 1955 levee failure on the Feather River, which resulted in the deaths of at least 38 people. The personal safety and economic stability of large segments of the population are reliant on flood management systems that, until recent efforts, did not begin to meet modern engineering standards. Numerous projects and programs have been implemented in the basin over the years to reduce flood risk, including the Feather River West Levee Project. As part of protection of adjacent communities, the parkway area inside the levee may be entirely underwater in high water periods. Any development proposed in the floodway as part of this project must prioritize safety and levee integrity, and be planned and designed to account for future flood events.

Challenge: Frequent flooding and levee integrity limit the amount and kinds of recreational development that are appropriate here.

Opportunity: Those limits also define the natural character of the area and help protect it from over development in perpetuity.

Natural environment and wildlife habitat

The lower Feather River is a prime area for animal and riparian habitat. Located along the Pacific Flyway, it provides migratory respite for migrating waterfowl.¹ This entire area is in a primarily natural state with the older riparian vegetation extending along the river's edge, creating a crucial habitat for a variety of wildlife.

It is imperative that this ecosystem be preserved, and as needed, restored. All efforts should be made to minimize the impacts on this fragile environment through the careful planning and placement of trails and other recreational facilities. The woodlands area needs significant reforestation to restore it to its natural state and preserve the natural habitat. The wetlands preservation is crucial for the local ecosystem and will provide an excellent outdoor classroom to

educate the public. The same principals should apply to the Shanghai Bend area.

Opportunity: Enhancing the natural environment and rehabilitating habitat supports wildlife and offers area residents easy access to the river.

Challenge: Habitat restoration may be incompatible with some active or intensive recreational uses.

Homelessness

Homeless and transient populations have been attracted to this area for the isolation and the shelter that the vegetation provides. Encampments in the project area have contributed to public perception that this area is unsafe, which has led to a general lack of willingness to use this area by the public.

Minimizing the impact of homelessness on the quality of life of all Sutter County residents is a high priority of the Sutter County Board of Supervisors.² The Board has identified three main areas of action: reducing camping in undesignated areas; engaging non-profits and service organizations; and developing preventative measures. Since 2019, Sutter County has established an emergency shelter, adopted an ordinance prohibiting camping or storing property on public lands or private property (without permission), purchased a motel with state grant funds and turned it over to a non-profit agency to operate as low cost housing, and created a safe overnight camping area for those who need a place to sleep. Working within the limits of a federal court ruling that prohibits enforcement of camping bans without sufficient shelter space available, Sutter County has reduced the number of encampments in the proposed park area from more than 100 to about two dozen. This number fluctuates, but outreach by law enforcement and behavioral health staff is ongoing, with the goal of supporting homeless individuals in finding alternatives to camping along the west bank of the Feather River. This goal has added urgency within the levee, as the threat to human safety and property during flood events is extreme, and emergency response and rescue are challenging in this area.

Opportunity: Forward momentum is being achieved with the homelessness issue in Sutter County as a whole, and especially within the project area.

Challenge: Continuing this forward trajectory will require continued funding and other ongoing resources on behalf of Sutter County, which are limited.

Challenge: Both homelessness itself, and public perceptions about homelessness, need to be considered as part of ongoing planning for change and development in the project area.

Trail connections

There are opportunities to connect trails within this project area to extended trail routes both up and down river. The City of Yuba City has constructed trails throughout the remainder of the Feather River Parkway, and is currently in the process of extending the parkway to the north to Live Oak. These connected projects will create a local corridor for residents commuting to work who cycle and walk.

The Sacramento Area Council of Governments identifies the Feather River Parkway as part of the overall regional trail network, and has expressed interest linking it to the Sacramento metro area and American River Parkway.³

Opportunities: The levee top, where accessible, can provide a through-route linking park areas and extending pedestrian and bike options along the Feather River.

California Department of Fish and Wildlife lands in the project area

The California Department of Fish and Wildlife (CDFW) owns land in Shanghai Bend - see project area map on page 2. Sutter County and the RCD are pursuing the idea of a transfer of this property to the County, or other options for management that enable the land to be incorporated into plans and improvements for the project area as a whole. Allowable uses and how CDFW-ownership relates to overall project planning needs to be addressed ahead of detailed-level design or any physical or management changes to CDFW lands directly, but

resolving these questions will also enable more effective implementation of projects on County-owned lands in the rest of the project area.

CDFW manages the extended Feather River Wildlife Area along both sides of the Feather River south of Yuba City/Marysville – Shanghai Bend is the northernmost unit. A partnership with CDFW could be beneficial in highlighting the wildlife area as an attraction and resource along a future trail connection to Sacramento.

Challenge: Until specific guidance is provided by CDFW about management and potential improvements on the Shanghai Bend property, material changes to the area can't be implemented.

Opportunity: Resolving what is or isn't allowable on the property could clarify who is responsible for maintenance and safety issues, and how they can be addressed in the future.

Nearby and county-wide outdoor recreation access

For a population of 99,683, Sutter County experiences a lack of public open spaces for recreational activities. According to the State of California Park Access mapping tool, 83% of Yuba City residents, and 70% of residents of Sutter County as a whole, live in areas where there are less than 3 acres of park land per 1000 residents.⁴ A large percentage of the land base in the county is private agricultural properties, so although there is abundant open space in the county, there are limited close to home public places to get outdoors. With this in mind, development of the parkway should consider opportunities to provide recreational uses not available elsewhere nearby, within the limits of what is practical or possible inside the levee and compatible with wildlife habitat.

Opportunity: The parkway could offer recreational uses that are currently limited or not available in the Yuba-Sutter area or Sutter County.

Access points in the project area

Due to private properties abutting the levee, there are only three places where the project area

can be accessed on foot or bike – at the boat dock at the north end; at the south end of 2nd Street near the middle of the project area; and at Shanghai Bend Road at the south end of the project area. Parking is available at both the north and south access points, although the Shanghai Bend Road parking has been the source of conflict and concern for the adjacent neighborhood due to unclear management responsibilities and frequent long-term camping on site. Planning for future development of the park should include both providing sufficient parking, and a plan for how that parking will be managed to maintain safe and sanitary conditions.

Challenge: Parking design and safety measures should account for the limited number of access points and safety and security concerns of nearby neighborhoods.

Funding

Sutter County presently does not have the funding to be able to dedicate significant capital outlay or operational support to this

project. The County's limited tax base is not diversified (it is primarily agricultural based) and has remained relatively flat over the last several years. Combined with the rising costs of pension, health care, and overall inflation, the County has experienced fiscal strain in virtually all departments; and has never been in a position to be able to expand or enhance existing services. Although the County has thoroughly vetted what needs to happen within the involved departments in order to make this project a success, the lack of available discretionary funding is always a constraint. Therefore, this project will not occur unless a grant is obtained which will fund the majority of the one-time construction cost. The County has determined that should the project be completed, it would need to dedicate about \$150,000 to \$200,000 in annual operating costs in order to effectively patrol and maintain the property. These costs would be budgeted in the Sheriff's Office and General Services; though ongoing funding would also need to be identified at that point in time.



Existing trail within Parkway area

INITIAL DEVELOPMENT RECOMMENDATIONS FROM SURVEY INPUT [ORGANIZED BY GOAL]

In addition to broad goals, survey input suggested some specific elements or actions that may be part of achieving the vision of the Feather River Parkway. Further work needs to be done on the logistics and feasibility of implementing these ideas, but due to high community interest they are included here for future reference.

Survey input also suggested general community awareness of the need to plan not just for short term changes or improvements, but also for how to maintain those improvements in the long term.

Community safety and wellbeing

New or updated safety, security and cleanliness measures. Overall strategies and details to be determined by Sutter County, but potentially including:

- Gating of parking areas based on set park hours
- Vegetation management
- Increased law enforcement presence on site
- Regular maintenance and garbage removal
- Coordination with Sutter Yuba Homeless Consortium and service providers

Identification of resources (funding, staff time, etc.) to support these services and activities in the long term.

Ecological health

Landscape rehabilitation and habitat improvements including:

- Removal of invasive species
- Revegetation/restoration of damaged areas (burns, social trails, etc.)
- New planting of native and locally adapted species

Plan for ongoing monitoring and management of this area's natural resources, possibly including

partnerships or collaborations with researchers or specialists.

Recreational access

Construction or renovation of recreation facilities, including:

- Trails for pedestrians and bikes
- Parking (cars/bikes)
- Shade
- Seating
- Garbage receptacles
- Informational signage

Other new recreational amenities or activities are likely to be considered for the parkway, but at this time need further exploration of community interest and feasibility. Some ideas raised in the survey included:

- Fitness course
- Equestrian trails/facilities
- Fishing access improvements
- Disc golf course
- Group picnic areas
- Play structures
- Restrooms
- Food/restaurants
- Interpretive signage
- Educational events

Plan for ongoing maintenance of new/existing facilities, in coordination with safety/security/cleanliness measures above.

FURTHER PLANNING AND IMPLEMENTATION

Recent progress and current activities

- In late January 2022, the RCD and Sutter County submitted an application for the State of California's Rural Recreation and Tourism grant (RRT grant) to support recreational improvements and new facilities, some ecological restoration work, and associated pre-construction costs like detail design and permitting/compliance. A decision about whether this project will be funded by the RRT program is expected within 3-4 months. Whether or not this funding is awarded will partially determine next steps.
- Preparation of the RRT grant application included several actions that support project implementation even if funding is not awarded, including two supporting resolutions from the Sutter County Board of Supervisors; consultation with the California Conservation Corps (CCC) that confirmed that this project is eligible for CCC support and participation; and exploration of expected costs and potential sources of technical expertise (both private consultants and public programs.)
- The Sutter County RCD is in the process of contracting for removal of fire damaged trees and invasive vegetation within the project area.

Next steps

PROJECT-WIDE

- Coordination with California Department of Fish and Wildlife about the future management and maintenance of the Shanghai Bend unit of the Feather River Wildlife Area (within project area.) Informal discussions between Sutter County and/or the RCD and CDFW have been started, but no decision has been reached or formal guidance provided about what is or could be allowable on that parcel in terms of development, restoration, or programming. Clarifying the role of this land in the overall Feather River Parkway project is key to being prepared to move forward with most other

elements of implementation.

- Review of this document by key stakeholders – including vision, goals, initial development recommendations, and planned next steps. Ensure the path outlined is fully supported.
- Further stakeholder and community engagement: A variety of service and recreational organizations and agencies in the Yuba-Sutter area expressed support for and interest in participating in this project. Grant funding is designed for construction and startup costs but the long term vitality of the parkway as a public space is dependent on community investment and stewardship – beginning to plan for public participation in the long term can be an important aspect of long term success and sustainability. The project team will be reaching out to those stakeholders to review progress to date and brainstorm about future roles and involvement.

COMMUNITY SAFETY AND WELLBEING

- Sutter County will determine a strategy to address current and expected safety, security and cleanliness/maintenance needs (in consultation with Sutter County Sheriff's Office, Levee District 1, Sutter Yuba Homeless Consortium and other experts). This may include physical changes to the site, plans for emergency response and law enforcement coverage, maintenance strategies, collaboration with volunteers or other measures.
- As appropriate, elements of that strategy can be reflected in plans, grant applications and budgeting for physical infrastructure and/or future maintenance.
- This work could set the stage or create the institutional infrastructure to support other work - including new recreational facilities, clean up, and environmental restoration - to encourage recreational use and help build community comfort with using the space.

ECOLOGICAL HEALTH

- Sutter County RCD is exploring options for partnerships with universities and/or nonprofits to provide guidance on ecological restoration across the site. Expert advice will drive next steps in restoration – it will likely include collaborating with local organizations and may require seeking additional grant funding.
- The RRT grant proposed budget includes some funding for woodland and wetland restoration and tree planting as supporting expenses to development of recreational facilities on site. If that funding is awarded some restoration work will be incorporated into site construction.

RECREATIONAL ACCESS

- The RRT grant proposed budget includes funding for soft surface trails, a bike path, a disc golf course, parking area improvements, wildlife viewing areas, a pavilion, seating, picnic tables, and garbage cans, as well as pre-construction costs such as design, compliance and permitting. If awarded it will provide the resources to thoroughly update the recreational infrastructure within the park.
- Whether or not the RRT grant funding is awarded, now is a good time to convene local recreation groups such as bike and disc golf clubs to incorporate their advice into detail level design and begin to plan for future programming and park use. Methods and strategy for this outreach and advice is to be determined by the project team.

ENDNOTES

- 1 Feather River - Lower | Audubon Important Bird Areas <https://www.audubon.org/important-bird-areas/feather-river-lower>
- 2 Sutter County FY 2021-22 Countywide Top Priorities | Sutter County, CA <https://www.suttercounty.org/government/board-of-supervisors/countywide-top-priorities>
- 3 Sacramento Region Parks and Trails Strategic Development Plan - Sacramento Area Council of Governments: <https://www.sacog.org/sacramento-region-parks-and-trails-strategic-development-plan>
- 4 Parks for All Californians: Park Access Tool: <https://www.parksforcalifornia.org/parkaccess/>