

COMMENTARY

## **Commentary: Update on St. Helena trails and open space plan**

**DAVID KNUDSEN**

Dec 5, 2023

The logo for the St. Helena Star is centered on a dark red background. It features the words "ST.", "HELENA", and "STAR" stacked vertically in a large, white, serif font. The text has a subtle glow effect, making it stand out against the dark background. The entire logo is framed by a thin, light-colored border.

# ST. HELENA STAR

*(Editor's note: This commentary is adapted from a statement David Knudsen read to the City Council on Nov. 28.)*

For all the residents who've reached out and asked, here's an update on the Walking Trails and Open Space initiative.

To give you a timeline, almost five years ago the subcommittee was established:

- to deliver on the promise of the 1990s-era General Plan which detailed trails to be established beside Sulfur Creek and the Napa River, and the further commitments the city has made through the Pedestrian Plan and the current General Plan,
- to encourage passive recreation and health, and

- to provide amenities befitting a leading small town and visitor destination.

We had frequent meetings at old City Hall and at the Carnegie Building amongst ourselves and in consultation with city staff, meetings with organizations in and around town, polling the community, external research, presentations to the Parks and Rec Commission, and a progress report that was enthusiastically received by council.

After a lot of work, we focused on recommendations that had:

- substantial benefits for residents and visitors,
- minimal fiscal impacts on the city and staff time, and
- had precedence either already within the city of St. Helena, other government entities in Napa County, or in the wider Bay Area.

We delivered four recommendations, to:

1. Publish walking loops all starting at Hunt and Main with maps and signage — to give visitors a reason to linger in St. Helena aside from shopping, wine tasting and dining.

We're following the example of many Bay Area towns that have set up official walking routes.

2. Open opportunities for walking paths and trails, including existing trails at Bell Canyon and Lower Reservoir.

We're following the example of our own town that created about a decade ago the trail at the end of Adams Street to the Napa River, and the county of Napa together with the city of Napa Water Division which created the Lake Hennessey Regional Park which shows it's straightforward to allow the public to walk near existing reservoirs.

3. Create voluntary open space easements or access, to extend city insurance to cover landowners who chose to allow walking on specific paths on their property.

Our example here is the Adams-Hunt pathway, established in 1993, which assigns liability and maintenance of the path to the city of St. Helena.

4. Require development agreements for larger-scale proposals in our town to incorporate public walking trails as part of their plans.

What have been ad hoc agreements are to be codified to provide this public benefit to residents and visitors.

We largely finished the work of the subcommittee nearly two years ago. Since that time, we've gone through a California Environmental Quality Act determination process shepherded by the community development director, and the plan was formally approved by the Parks and Rec Commission a year ago.

Since then, we've looked for a calendar slot — we thought it was going to be in the spring and the city manager had explored July Planning Commission and August City Council dates — but that was postponed due to the work that the council has been completing on things like the water rates and the new zoning code.

Now we're very close. The plan is endorsed by Rianda House, the St. Helena Farmers' Market, Blue Zones Project, the St. Helena Chamber of Commerce, and the St. Helena Star editorial board. We have over 100 residents who have pledged to support the plan publicly. We have a couple dozen who will attend meetings and volunteer to support and maintain the trails, just like the volunteers for the city-owned St. Helena Community Garden and Scout Hall. We currently have a capital budget of \$50,000 already allocated this fiscal year from park impact fees, which is far more than is expected to be spent, particularly as the plan is phased in over four years.

I estimate that there's probably a further day or two of staff time required. I've put our Public Works together with Napa County Open Space to make sure we don't duplicate work that's already done. And I look forward to bringing this well-thought-through and well-supported plan to the City Council, all 92 pages of it.

I want to thank the members of the subcommittee: (now Supervisor) Anne Cottrell, Michelle Deasy, Pam Smithers, Richard Seiferheld, Bob Frescura, and Rebekah Weeman, and the support we had first from City Manager Mark Prestwich and now from Anil Comelo, from Community Development Director Maya DeRosa, from Parks and Rec Director Andre Pichly and now from Dave Jahns, and from Public Works Director Erica Ahmann-Smithies and now from Joe Leach.

I'd also like to acknowledge the support of existing and former members of the Parks and Rec Commission, the Planning Commission, and the City Council.

Thank you.

MORE INFORMATION



**Star editorial: Trail plan is a slam dunk**

Letter: Make St. Helena a walker's delight  
Plan aims to open public trails, make St. Helena more walkable  
Rianda House hosts free car show May 4 in St. Helena

