

TOP STORY

EDITOR'S PICK

St. Helena approves plan to enhance trails, open space

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A long-gestating plan to enhance St. Helena's walking trails and open space has finally been approved.

The City Council voted 4-0 Tuesday to adopt a plan seeking to “protect existing walking paths, expand walking opportunities today, and create ways to enhance this legacy in the future.”

It suggests publishing some walking routes, using public-private partnerships and development agreements to create new trails, and pursuing public access at trails that mostly exist already at Bell Canyon Reservoir, Lower Reservoir, Pope Street Bridge, Community Forest and the former York Creek Dam.

Supporter Linda Brown said the goal of the plan is “to make St. Helena a safe place to walk and a place to make new memories for both tourists and locals alike.”

An ad hoc subcommittee of Parks and Recreation commissioners and other members of the public came up with the plan in 2019, refined it with input from city staff and members of the City Council, and won the parks commission's unanimous

endorsement in November 2022. A St. Helena Star editorial from February 2023 called the plan “a slam dunk” and recommended council approval.

However, the plan never got to the public hearing stage during City Manager Anil Comelo’s tenure.

David Knudsen, the former City Council member who has championed the plan since its inception, said he kept checking in with Comelo after the Parks and Recreation Commission endorsed the plan.

“It was always ‘Staff is so busy, staff is so busy.’ And this went on for three years,” Knudsen said.

Frustrated with the lack of progress, members of the nonprofit Walk St. Helena decided to “put the cart in front of the horse,” Knudsen said. They updated the plan in 2025, reimagined it as a ballot initiative, and collected 476 valid signatures this spring, more than the 351 required to qualify for the ballot.

The council was left with three choices: adopt the plan as written, place it on the Nov. 3 ballot, or order an impartial report on the initiative’s impacts and then choose from one of the first two options within 30 days.

Interim City Manager Jim McCann recommended the council immediately adopt the plan. He said it’s consistent with the city’s other plans and would “bring significant benefit to the community.” He described it as a “framework” that will take more work to implement.

“It’s a starting step,” McCann said. “It requires work by the staff to integrate it into our general plan and into our municipal code, and then to identify projects that can move forward.”

Supporters say the plan can be implemented in three years with no city funding, aside from staff time. Volunteers would raise all the money — roughly \$300,000 — and pledge to maintain and monitor the trails.

Knudsen said it would follow through on general plan and housing element policies that call for expanding pedestrian opportunities.

Members of the public are generally supportive of the overall plan, although some neighbors of the Lower Reservoir expressed concerns about safety and access for that trail, and Patrick Kenealy warned about environmental problems and fire risk related

to a potential Sulphur Creek trail.

“I think we need to make a commitment to the community that we will take all of those concerns into account as we move forward to develop the plan and implement it,” Mayor Paul Dohring said.

“But the upside is health, wellness and mental well-being in a time when we can all use that,” he added.

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