

Cambria Forest Committee October 13, 2023 meeting summary

After some conversation on a variety of environmental issues and concerns, the meeting was called to order by Chairman Crosby Swartz at 10:10 AM. In attendance were Secretary Christine Heinrichs, Treasurer Laura Swartz, Board member Julie Jorgensen, Greenspace Executive Director Karin Argano, FFRP Executive Director Kitty Connolly, PROS Committee members Shannon Sutherland and Jeff Wilson, and CCSD Board Director and CFC liaison Harry Farmer. CCSD General Manager Matt McElhenie joined the meeting at 10:30.

The meeting started with Crosby commenting on a drive he and Laura took up Bridge St, and observing the condition of the Covell Ranch following the recent Fire Safe Council fuel reduction project on the right side of the road.. He remarked that the land looked well cared for, and that in talking with local CA Native Plant Society member Neil Havlik, he felt the same. Jeff then inquired regarding the tour of Covell Ranch given by the Fire Safe Council a few months ago, and if the same could be happening in the future to observe the progress of the project.

Ms Argano provided an update on Greenspace activities. She reported that Greenspace is working with RCD (Upper Salinas-Las Tablas Resource Conservation District), and has obtained a block grant to help fund a Forest Management Plan and a Fuel Reduction Project in Strawberry Canyon. Recently a group of folks from Greenspace, RCD and FFRP toured the Canyon, creating seven segments of the area, doing a tree count, examining understory, and taking photographs. Soon they'll be doing a GIS (Geographic Information System) Forest Management Plan and Fuel Reduction Project in the first 21 acres beginning at the Burton Drive and Kay Street entrance. It is hoped that work will begin by the end of 2023 depending on the weather and time available. Karin and neighbors in the area are quite enthusiastic about this. Also, goats are going to be brought in using the 30/30/30 formula, meaning 33% eaten, 33% trampled on, and 33% left untouched. Another benefit of using goats is that they eat poison oak. There will also be a small area that will be pursued as a grass controlled weed abatement trial program. Karin added this would not be a Vegetative Treatment Program, but focused on Forest Management and Fuel Reduction that is considered normal maintenance and therefore would not require permitting. She also said up to seven hours had been spent examining the health of the trees and other foliage, and was happy to report the majority of trees in the Canyon are in good health, for which everyone is truly grateful. Finally, Karin stated that this past year the main focus of Greenspace was improving the Creekside Reserve on Center St. And while another planting area will be developed on the Reserve in early 2024, this coming year upgrading Strawberry Canyon would be a top priority.

At this point Shannon remarked on the support the Forest Committee had given Jeff Wilson being on the PROS Committee to counterbalance her support for recreational opportunities, especially on the East Ranch. Crosby and Laura said their support for Jeff had more to do with having an advocate for Open Space and the forested areas in Cambria. Shannon then added she is equally concerned about Open Space, as well as pursuing recreation for the youth of our community, including on the East Ranch. Laura remarked that the Forest Committee is not opposed to activities of the East Ranch, but hopes for added attention being given to other Open Space possibilities. A bit more discussion continued to address the issue.

At this point CCSD General Manager McElhenie joined the meeting. Crosby then turned attention to the Fern Canyon Conservation Easement, noting that the major reason for an easement is to maintain the forested areas in as natural a state as possible. He observed that weed abatement projects often exceed what is allowable by an easement, especially when more than 100 feet away from a structure. Crosby then asked the GM if he had any comments, to which Mr McElhenie stated he hoped at some point to be provided additional guidelines regarding weed abatement in open space, including Fern Canyon, and he did not wish for the District to have any negative impact on the environment. Crosby then remarked that the Land Conservancy of San Luis Obispo holds the Conservation Easement, and a coordinated effort with the LCSLO should be pursued by the CCSD. Laura added that also involved is the California Coastal Conservancy that began Land Conservancy projects nearly 40 years ago. Crosby encouraged the General Manager to contact Deputy Director Daniel Bohlman at the LCSLO, who is very knowledgeable and has been involved in easements in the Cambria area for years. And while the GM expressed concern regarding how to address caring for Fern Canyon, Laura reminded him that the area is a wetlands and requires special treatment.

Jeff Wilson then entered the conversation, suggesting that perhaps US-LT RCD Program Manager Spencer Gordon could be contacted by the District, in that while he will be seriously involved in the work to be done in Strawberry Canyon, he also was aware of circumstances in Fern Canyon. and talking with him might lead to a longer term management plan for that area. Mr McElhenie remarked that much concern is being voiced by members of the community regarding the potential for fire, and he felt that while there is a need to move forward to address this concern, the needs of the natural environment must also be considered. Laura observed that most of Fern Canyon is green, most all homes nearby are over 100 feet away, so there is less need for "fuel reduction".

Julie Jorgensen then spoke to the need to consider the steepness of the slopes and the sandy soil in that area, and once efforts are made to go uphill to do fuel reduction this would cause a tremendous amount of erosion. In addition, the soil could then wind up in the creek, doing damage to the environment in a harmful way. GM McElhenie replied any effort in this area would be a well thought out plan. Julie then described speaking with her insurance company who stated that her home was located in a relatively low fire risk zone.. She added that the insurance company divided Cambria into several zones regarding the danger of fire, and insured accordingly.

In Laura's Treasurer's Report, she acknowledged that two recent generous donations of \$350 each had been received, of course increasing the amount of monies in the CFC account, though \$500 of that money would need to go toward insurance for CFC officers. Laura also acknowledged having finally heard from the IRS correcting the Agency's long standing error as to the status of the Forest Committee, and that now CFC would finally be officially eligible for grant funding, and would appreciate donations as well.

Crosby gave a report from the recent Fire Safe Focus Group meeting, including the success of the recent community wide chipping event, and the continuing efforts at the removal of French Broom. Also noted was that the Fire Safe Council presently has 55 projects active throughout

SLO County, including finishing up the work on the Covell Ranch. He also briefly alluded to other projects taking place, including the ember proofing of houses in the North County, which of course would be useful in Cambria. Also reported at the meeting was that efforts of the local CERT (Community Emergency Response Team) were currently on hold, though the reason was not necessarily made clear.

Crosby then acknowledged communication between himself and the CCSD, especially with F&R Supervisor David Aguirre, having recently sent him the Vacant Parcel Assessment Report, as well as sending General Manager McElhenie a copy of the Fern Canyon Conservation Easement.

Laura also offered the opportunity to provide information and documents from the Land Conservancy that went back as far as 1984 to the newly formed PROS Standing Committee, including the TDC Program (Transfer of Development Credits) and the retirement of lots. Crosby remarked to Jeff Wilson, the newest member of the PROS Committee, that much of this information is available at the Forest Committee website.

Mr Wilson then asked about items on the Agenda relating to various Sub Committee Reports that were most always present, wondering if they were still active, especially as the topics seemed relevant Crosby stated this was an excellent observation, and that the topics had been around for quite a while but not always discussed. Jeff said he would really like to see these Sub Committees activated, especially regarding Forest Management and the Fire Hazard Fuel Reduction Program, and he would be willing to be involved. Crosby noted that District efforts at fuel reduction were currently happening on a weekly basis.

A discussion then took place regarding the removal of invasive species, especially grasses. Crosby pointed out an article provided by Christine Heinrichs regarding an indigenous tribe in Wisconsin that make all of their decisions based on the first priority being action taken for the health of the forest, and that ultimately everything else falls into place over time. Laura then pointed out that local arborist Blair McCormick has been studying many of the practices of the Native Americans regarding forest management and forest health. Crosby added perhaps grant funding could be obtained to engage Mr McCormick's services to attend to the health of Cambria's forested areas.

At this Crosby adjourned the meeting at 11:15 AM.

The next Cambria Forest Committee meeting will be on Friday, November 10th, 2023 at 10AM via Zoom.

This summary written and submitted by CCSD Board Director and CFC liaison Harry Farmer.