

Summary of the Cambria Forest Committee September 15, 2023 meeting

The meeting was called to order by Chairman Crosby Swartz at 10:07AM. Also in attendance were Secretary Christine Heinrichs, Treasurer Laura Swartz, Greenspace Executive Director Karin Argano, Friends of the Fiscalini Ranch Preserve Executive Director Kitty Connolly, Upper Salinas-Las Tablas Resource Conservation District Board member Delores Howard, US-LT RCD Program Manager Spencer Gordon, Rancho Marino Reserve Director Keith Seydel, local CA Native Plant Society representatives Neil Havlik and David Chipping, Cambria Parks Recreation and Open Space Committee member Shannon Sutherland, and CCSD Board Director and CFC liaison Harry Farmer.

Chair Swartz spoke briefly regarding Director and Officer Liability Insurance, recommending that this be renewed, and stated any donations made by Committee members toward this would be welcomed. The policy is roughly \$500 annually.

There were no Public or Director Comments or Reports. There were no Minutes for the August 11th CFC meeting, but Chair Swartz referred to the Meeting Summary provided by CCSD Director and liaison Farmer in the CCSD meeting Agenda packet.

The Treasurer's Report indicated, due to recent expenses, only \$167.15 remain in the CFC bank account. Treasurer Swartz indicated she will be making a contribution to help cover the CPA costs for the Tax Return. She also reported she's not heard back from the IRS regarding the Business Master File, which is important to have when seeking grant funding.

Chair Swartz then discussed Agenda Item 5.1.: Native American Forest Management Practices. He remarked that if decisions are made with the priority being the health of the forest that everything falls into place. By removing only dead and dying trees and leaving the healthiest ones no matter the size, the forest will ultimately flourish. Discussion took place regarding having before and after photos of forested areas where fuel reduction treatments had taken place. Ms Sutherland offered her services, having the ability to fly drones and utilize aerial photography. David Chipping stated that the County has photographs available using Google Earth that were recently taken that could be helpful.

At one point a comment was made as to the Cambria Fire Department fuel reduction report, and that over 500 properties had yet to be cleared as of September, when the number is usually closer to 150. Mr Chipping spoke to the need for greater efforts being made by the CCSD to provide much needed fuel reduction in Cambria, and perhaps have the hired contractor train District Facilities and Resources employees in doing this work.

At this point Ms Heinrichs alluded to a recent decision made by CA State Parks to no longer make the effort to remove thistle and mustard, having declared them "uncontrollable". She said she would try to get in touch with State Senator John Laird and Assemblyman Dawn Addis to address this issue, feeling that it is an unacceptable policy. Mr Chipping said he's observed less maintenance work being done in local State Parks this past year, perhaps due to they're being less staff available to do the work. Ms Heinrichs then said that successful volunteer efforts from

various groups in recent years such as the Sierra Club were being discontinued.

Neil Havlik then jumped back to the previous topic of aerial vegetative mapping, saying that the South County Resource Conservation District was pursuing these efforts from Morro Bay to Avila and Pismo Beach down to Oceano. He suggested that Cambria would be better served by doing our own drone surveys. Shannon then added she was a licensed drone pilot and had the necessary software needed to do the work.

Spencer Gordon then remarked that he was involved with the South County Vegetative Treatment Project, and they would also be helping out in North County, such as Santa Margarita Lake, as well as in coastal areas, and the work was very detailed and “fine scaled”. David Chipping remarked on how confusing it can be to identify what is healthy vegetation that needs to remain as opposed to what should not continue to exist. Crosby then pointed out the difficulty to the untrained eye to determine perennial grasses that should remain versus annual “weeds” turning brown that should be removed.

Under New Business, Crosby pointed out the PROS Commission is now the PROS Standing Committee, with CCSD Director Michael Thomas being the new Chair, with the first meeting being Tuesday, October 3rd at 10AM. Therefore, it would be good to attend the meetings and assist the Committee in determining what topics and projects PROS should address versus where not to focus their energies. Crosby pointed out that Shannon has organized a list of local 501(c)(3)’s to identify and promote what they do. Shannon then stated she’s encouraged representatives of these groups to attend the October 3rd meeting and inform the Committee and the public as to what they wish to accomplish, hopefully leading to more effective coordination of the efforts involved. At this point Kitty pointed out how important addressing Open Space will be moving forward. Shannon emphasized the necessity of putting the “O” back in PROS, and determining which groups in our community are doing so. Laura pointed out there is now a vacant seat on PROS, and how helpful it would be to have someone with an environmental outlook to be seated on this new Committee, thereby giving a permanent voice to an often overlooked subject that always needs attention. Crosby indicated that recently PROS has focused almost exclusively on the East Ranch and the Community Park, while there’s a need to give equal attention to activities on both the East and West Ranch. Laura noted there are open lots also owned by the CCSD throughout Cambria, and how attention must be paid to complications such as permitting, the Buildout Reduction Program, and so forth, adding that her and Crosby had been attending PROS meetings for years, and they’ve mostly wanted their voice to be heard. Shannon added her frustration in also not seeing “things get done”, then assertively pointed out the need for various environmental organizations in town to begin attending PROS meetings, hopefully present their concerns, recommending how to address issues of importance regarding the natural world around us.

Crosby then pointed out how complicated various Conservation Easements could be, and dealing with the CA Coastal Conservancy and other State Agencies. Laura mentioned the need to bring this information forward to the PROS Committee. Crosby added the conservation of open space lots, especially those owned by the CCSD, is required due to past agreements and legal issues, and efforts should be made by the District as to land conservation. Karin pointed out that Jeff

Wilson, a member of the Greenspace Board, pays much attention to what is happening environmentally, providing monthly reports, attending various Board and Committee meetings, and speaking to the issues of importance. Shannon then said she'd be putting Greenspace reports on the monthly PROS Committee Agenda. Laura added that the SLO Land Conservancy is also involved in Cambria open space and needs to voice and represent their concerns as well.

Crosby then moved to Unfinished Business, and the topic of Coastal Zone Vegetative Treatment Standards. He pointed out this is a document in the VTP EIR, and is required to be referenced regarding projects to be addressed in the Coastal Zone. There are two types of projects, Forest Health and Fire Prevention. He remarked how confusing various requirements were, making it difficult to separate "defensible space" around homes and structures versus attending to the overall well being of forested areas. Neil Havlik pointed out that the Native Plant Society has emphasized the need for a standard in balancing Forest Health versus Fire Prevention, and the need to leave at least 25% of ground cover such as toyon, oaks and coffee berry rather than removing all understory. Crosby addressed the confusing situation of Cal Fire being responsible for inspecting developed properties in Cambria, while the Cambria Fire Department has authority over undeveloped parcels, and how once demands increase on Cal Fire they have less time to address defensible space requirements in residential areas surrounded by the forest. Briefly touched upon was the extensive removal of understory by Cal Fire on the Fiscalini Ranch close to Highway One that took place several years ago. Laura pointed out that while some ground cover such as coffee berry had returned, there was now a severe abundance of poison oak. Crosby said at least some healthy trees were left, and many were returning despite the aggressive nature of the project. Both Crosby and Laura expressed concern that more recent and current projects are removing far more trees and understory, therefore compromising forest health.

Crosby then pointed out the need to connect with the new General Manager, the recently hired Fire Chief and Facilities and Resources Supervisor, and for Forest Committee attendees to let Crosby know what important environmental issues they need to be made aware of. Shannon suggested that perhaps whatever concerns need addressing should be presented at a PROS meeting, encouraging further dialogue and discussion. Neil recommended taking a more informal approach among various groups that would allow for a more wide ranging discussion of the issues. Shannon highlighted the need for a comprehensive maintenance plan to address environmental and other needs and concerns, including weed abatement.

Other topics were briefly discussed, including concerning the US-LT RCD.

The meeting was adjourned at 11:18 AM.

The next Cambria Forest Committee meeting will be Friday, October 13th at 10AM via Zoom.

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