

SAN FRANCISCO BAY CONSERVATION AND DEVELOPMENT COMMISSION

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TO: San Francisco Bay Area Water Trail Steering Committee
FROM: Sara Polgar, Water Trail Project Manager (415/352-3645 sarap@bcdc.ca.gov)
SUBJECT: Water Trail Implementation – Part 2; Trail Head Designation Process
(For Committee consideration on March 21, 2007)

Introduction

The Water Trail Steering Committee will continue its discussion of trail implementation in meeting seven (March 21, 2007). In the previous meeting, the Committee provided feedback on a conceptual organizational structure for the water trail, and an approach for designating launch sites as part of the trail. The water trail project staff will be seeking the Committee's input on updates to these implementation components, and the proposed process for trail head designation which was not addressed in meeting six. As requested by the Committee, this staff report provides additional information about the approach to trail head designation. It also proposes a process for trail head designation that is based on the principles that the Committee developed in previous meetings.

Trail Head Designation

Needs Related to Site Designation. In meetings and interviews, Committee members, other stakeholders and project staff have identified needs related to trail head designation.

- Within the first few years of implementation, the trail needs to gain some footing by establishing a critical mass of trail heads that enable the project managers to promote the sites as a water trail. The momentum will help generate interest among shoreline managers to designate their launch sites as trail heads, and the early successes might open up new funding opportunities.
- The water trail also needs a clearly articulated process for adding sites – one that incorporates a meaningful assessment of sites and carries out the requirements in the Bay Area Water Trail Act to protect wildlife, advance navigational safety and foster stewardship.
- Also, early in project implementation, two or three sites that have more challenging planning and management issues (e.g. wildlife disturbance or navigational safety concerns) should be fully designated and developed as trail heads. This will help project staff, managers and partners develop and assess management approaches for addressing these challenging issues.
- Lastly, the water trail project needs to be flexible and prepared to work on new access opportunities as they become available.



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To address these, the Water Trail Plan must explicitly lay out the priorities for initial trail development, and a process for additional site designations.

Review: Trail Head Designation Approach. In meeting six, the Steering Committee discussed an approach to trail head designation for the Water Trail Plan that would establish a working pool of existing and planned sites that fulfill three criteria as a backbone of the water trail. It is important to reiterate that this is not a final trail alignment and the working pool, or backbone, is not ready for promotion as the water trail. Some sites included in this group may never be further improved as trail heads, and, as access opportunities develop around the Bay, new sites may be added to this group.

Trail head designation is the inclusion or addition of launch sites in the water trail, and establishing this working pool of water trail sites is only a first step in trail head designation. It is an important first step, however, because it enables trail implementers and stakeholders to recognize the range of possibilities for a network of launch sites based on the current status of access for non-motorized small boats (NMSBs) onto San Francisco Bay. Establishing this working pool is critical to all aspects of trail implementation, including envisioning possibilities for interesting point-to-point trips, developing integrative outreach and educational information, and recognizing potential access, wildlife and safety issues. Moreover, inclusion of the backbone of launch sites in the Water Trail Plan provides a tangible basis for assessing these potential impacts in the environmental review of the plan.

The working pool launch sites are ones that:

- have launch facilities or planned facilities (e.g. ramp, float, etc.) or launch areas (e.g. a beach) that are or will be intended for this use;
- are open to the public; and
- do not have the following conditions that could preclude inclusion in the water trail:
 - the site lacks any other facilities (e.g. bathrooms, parking, etc.), does not have the space or capacity to ever provide any of these additional amenities, and is unlikely to be an interesting or useful stop-over site;
 - property ownership and rights are unclear for the site; or
 - the launch site owner or manager has expressed that s/he does not want the site on the trail now or in the future.

From these working pool sites, the plan would identify a subset of ‘high opportunity’¹ sites that require minimal assessment, planning, management changes and improvements (i.e. signage only) on which initial implementation efforts should be focused. High opportunity sites are ones where:

- launch facilities do not require additional improvements beyond signage;
- site managers support trail head designations; and
- no major management issues (e.g. user conflicts, wildlife disturbances, and health risks from poor water quality) exist that require further site assessment, planning or management changes prior to designation.

Focusing trail development efforts on these high opportunity sites facilitates creating a critical mass of trail heads to promote as the water trail early in the implementation process. These launches should be the easiest ones to develop into trail heads because they only require water trail-related signage, and they do not have significant challenges that would complicate site planning and management.

¹ High opportunity sites were referred to as low-hanging fruit in the “Water Trail Implementation” staff report dated February 2, 2007 and during the discussion at Steering Committee meeting six.

Staff's initial assessment of existing and planned launches indicates that several are high opportunity sites (see Figure 1)² – far too many to tackle at the outset of trail implementation. The trail planning process will result in a handful of high opportunity sites that staff recommends developing as part of the first, two-year work plan. As implementation of the trail progresses, trail and shoreline managers and stakeholders will need to reassess and update the list of high opportunity sites, and plan for the development of these to achieve the evolving strategic goals and objectives for the trail.

Trail Head Designation Process. Establishing a backbone of launch sites for the water trail is the first step in trail head designation. This section describes a process for how launch sites are fully designated. Staff used the overarching principles that the Committee discussed and developed previously to help define the designation process. These principles guide how the water trail will address the access, wildlife, safety and education issues.³

Trail head designation will often begin with the advocacy work of trail staff and proponents to convince agencies, organizations and individuals that own and manage shoreline access to include their sites in the trail and to improve access facilities. Some shoreline managers will see benefits of having their access points on the trail and approach the water trail project about designating their sites.

Regardless of how a launch site becomes a prospect, water trail staff and the owner or manager of a launch site will together assess the site conditions, opportunities and issues as they are relevant to the water trail. The assessment should describe:

- existing facilities and their condition for NMSB access and use;
- existing signage, available outreach information and education and stewardship programs or activities;
- the manager/owner's policies, requirements and plans for the site;
- current NMSB usage;
- existing and potential issues with increased use for NMSB activities (e.g. user conflicts, wildlife disturbance, safety concerns, etc.)

Depending on the current conditions at a site, staff may consult with experts and interested stakeholders to understand the potential impacts of expanding NMSB use at the site, and how to address these in site design and management and through education, outreach and stewardship. For example, if a site raises wildlife or safety concerns (e.g. because it is adjacent to a critical area such as a wildlife preserve or navigation zone), staff should seek input from the

² Based on feedback from the Steering Committee and other stakeholders, staff updated the maps in Figure 1. However, some suggested revisions were not possible to include in the maps due to limited space on the maps, or to complete in time for the mailing deadline for the staff report. Please contact Sara Polgar (415) 352-3645 or sarap@bcd.ca.gov if you have questions about the revisions.

³ The first principle is to identify and provide criteria for identifying critical areas of the Bay such as navigational exclusion zones, sensitive wildlife areas, and sites with poor water quality that require providing trail users with particular information, taking special management actions, or restricting access. The second principle calls for working with shoreline managers to conduct site assessments and planning to identify issues, and to create a plan for improving, managing and, if needed, monitoring a trail head. Third, the Committee heard requests from shoreline managers for specific guidance on trail head development and management— a toolbox of strategies that they can use to resolve access, wildlife or safety problems. The Committee drafted a preliminary set of strategies for this purpose. The fourth principle is a water trail ethic that teaches and promotes safe, low-impact boating practices and encourages boaters to be stewards of San Francisco Bay and the water trail. The last two principles are closely related. The Committee defined the components of a comprehensive trail education program to promote consistent and accurate educational messages. It also developed a specific principle on promoting safety in this education program, and through active coordination with boating groups and regulatory agencies.

appropriate organizations and experts such as U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service, Department of Fish and Game, Audubon Society, PRBO, U.S. Coast Guard, Harbor Safety Committee, Vessel Traffic Service, etc, and devise strategies to address these issues.

After assessing the conditions, needs and issues, water trail staff and the shoreline manager will come up with a plan with trail head development and management strategies for the site and propose this to the project Management Team. The components of the site, or trail head, plan will vary depending on the interests of the owner and the issues related to the site. For a high opportunity site (see the criteria on p.2 of this report), the development plan will probably be simple: a description of the proposed signage components and a budget. At this stage, it would be up to the project Management Team to accept this proposed plan, and designate the site when the signage is installed. For sites with major issues, the trail head plan should propose specific design, education and outreach, and/or management strategies to resolve these issues. These are sites that staff and the project Management Team should bring to the Partnership, or stakeholder group, for review, and then incorporate this input into the trail head plan. Again, once the trail head plan is implemented, the site should be designated as part of the water trail.

Many sites fall somewhere between these two extremes: they require basic launch facility improvements (e.g. repairs to a float, addition of bathrooms) in addition to water trail signage, but they are unlikely to cause major wildlife or safety problems. In these cases, the Management Team will determine whether the project needs to be reviewed at a stakeholder group meeting. Certainly, the Management Team should not make a decision on a prospective trail head without consulting appropriate experts and interested stakeholders, but the designation process should not be unnecessarily onerous by requiring every project to be reviewed in a meeting of the entire stakeholder group.

A significant component of the trail head designation process occurs completely outside of the water trail project. To make improvements to an access point, shoreline owners will inevitably have to seek permits and approvals from agencies at the local, state and/or federal level. Furthermore, to obtain funding for trail head improvements, project components (e.g. improvements to a ramp, or signage) will undergo additional review by the funding agency or organization. In most cases, one of these approval processes will involve or trigger environmental reviews. As discussed in the previous Steering Committee meeting, water trail staff will be responsible for maintaining an updated Partnership, or stakeholder group, emailing list and noticing this group about Bay Area environmental reviews (CEQA/NEPA processes) that potentially affect, or relate to, the water trail project.⁴

Within the scope of the water trail project, the designation process should result in a trail head plan that describes how the site will be improved or managed to address the trail-related access, wildlife, safety and education opportunities and issues at the site. The designation process will not replace the reviews and permitting processes that already exist for these projects. Furthermore, it should not create redundant reviews for the shoreline owner or manager to complete.

⁴ This will fill a notification gap that currently limits opportunities for public input on individual projects that can have regional importance as part of the water trail.