

# EL CHORRO REGIONAL PARK PROGRAMMING PLAN



"Our vision for El Chorro Regional Park's future."

Prepared by:



In association with:



May 2017

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Part I - INTRODUCTION

## Acknowledgments

The County of San Luis Obispo contracted with Andy Staples, ASGCA, and his company Staples Golf Design (Staples Golf), a golf course design firm based in Scottsdale, Arizona, to direct this plan to address the recent reduced irrigation water availability and diminishing revenues for Dairy Creek Golf Course, and consider the entire El Chorro Regional Park. Staples utilized his experience, combined with additional direction from Lief McKay of RRM Design Group, Landscape Architects and Park Planners, as well as input from County Staff, the public, and the El Chorro Regional Park Planning Advisory Committee. The analysis provided herein is the product of numerous on-site evaluations, plus community input beginning in the fall of 2016, and running through the spring of 2017.

El Chorro Regional Park Programming Plan Design Team:

- Andy Staples, Staples Golf Design – Team Leader
- Lief McKay, RRM Design Group – Landscape Architect & Park Planner

In accomplishing this work, Staples Golf and the Programming Plan Team, worked directly with County Staff and a County-appointed Advisory Committee. Those involved with this process were:

### County Staff

- Nick Franco, Director
- Larry Iaquinto, Assistant Director
- Josh Heptig, Golf Course Superintendent
- Shaun Cooper, Senior Park Planner

### Advisory Committee

- Greg Bettencourt
- Curtis Black
- Scott Cartwright
- Joel Clay
- Ron Gin
- Mattie Moore
- Pandora Nash-Karner
- Mary Pollock
- Chris Woods

Collectively, the responsibilities of these individuals included:

- ✓ Oversee Programming Plan process
- ✓ Review design concepts
- ✓ Provide input
- ✓ Collect and disseminate information
- ✓ Direct presentation objectives and format

## Executive Summary

The fiscal sustainability of continuing to operate Dairy Creek Golf Course (Dairy Creek) as an enterprise fund is currently jeopardized by the lack of available recycled water to irrigate the course. The goal of this plan is twofold. The first, is to provide the vision for a dynamic plan for the entire El Chorro Regional Park, that addresses the issue of a lack of water and the need for additional revenue to offset the current debt payment for the golf course. The second, and equally important objective, is to develop a plan that can be feasibly, and reasonably implemented, once the amount of long term water becomes known. This plan sets out to identify the highest-and-best-use of the Dairy Creek property, and provide the residents of San Luis Obispo County (County) a golf-oriented amenity that is used by 100% of the community.

Dairy Creek presents many exciting and encouraging possibilities. As the following plan will show, the County has some decisions to make as to how it would like to approach the long term future of Dairy Creek, given the current water crisis. Whether it remains an 18-hole course, or the total amount of playable holes is reduced, the property will indeed continue to provide golf within the context of the entire El Chorro Regional Park. With that, which of the potential options makes the most sense for the County and its residents, becomes the question. The intention of this plan is to provide quality options, based on available water, and allow the County to make educated decisions once the quantity of available long term water becomes known or as water availability changes in the future.

This plan will help guide the County's decisions as to the above, but a worthwhile sentiment that seems to be continually surfacing, and which has proven thus far to be accurate, is that the planning process setup by Staples Golf and County Staff, continues to work as intended. It has allowed for productive charrettes involving all park users, golfers and non-golfers alike, and has seen no insurmountable conflict and lots of agreement. This promising and positive trend is likely to continue through the Programming Plan's plausible implementation.



The options noted below identify the scenarios available to the County for how to handle the future layout of Dairy Creek Golf Course based upon the available water. The Team weighed the pros and cons of understanding what made the most economical sense from a long-term business perspective, versus the ability to provide a quality golf experience, be it 18 holes, or something less. The Team investigated these factors in the context of the long-term water availability, and what gave the County the best chances to repay the general fund annual commitment of up to \$485,000. The Team researched current and future trends in the game of golf, including a strong focus on beginners, families, and those that prefer to play golf in less time, and compared these trends to other non-golf activity revenue generators, understanding the County's goal of providing fiscally responsible, quality recreational activities to 100% of their residents.

Input by County Staff and the Advisory Committee has been enormously helpful to this process, particularly through their planning direction, and creation of the guiding principles and program elements (as described in future sections of this plan). Throughout this Programming Planning process, the Team continually sought to utilize this direction. The vision of a community asset used by 100% of County residents presents opportunities for the San Luis Obispo community to focus the specific values important to them, which will create a stronger community. A *newly marketed and positioned regional park* allows for everyone in the community to come together to continue to learn, grow, establish healthy habits, and cultivate positive attitudes, with focus around the game of golf.

## OBJECTIVES

1. Long range plan based on water
2. Quality "Park" experience
3. Reduce \$\$ loss
4. Establish a "Vision" for the future



General Recommendations

As confirmed from input throughout the design process, there is overwhelming support for keeping 18 holes intact, and in “as is” condition, provided there is an adequate amount of water to properly irrigate the existing 89 acres of turf. In the event the long-term commitment for a total of 250 acre feet (AF) of water cannot be achieved, the County is then challenged by deciding exactly what type of golf product to provide to the community, and under what economic model to provide it. As the writing of this report is finishing in May 2017, water is no longer being delivered to the golf course. The next delivery of water, absent a supplemental allocation of water, won't be until December 2017. The golf course cannot survive as is without a decision to either add supplemental water or close a portion of the course. The following is a summary of the alternative scenarios proposed based on future water availability thresholds:

1. **250 AF (89 irrigated acres):** *Maintain 18 holes as currently exists, and add additional non-golf uses on non-golf land.* This scenario keeps the golf course “as is,” and allocates a total of 250 acre feet of irrigation water per year. This scenario provides the best chance for the golf course to maximize its ability to generate golf-related revenue, and the least amount of General Fund support, while also causing the least amount of change to the current layout. This scenario also allows for the County to introduce certain non-golf related economic drivers to be situated on non-golf oriented land (See Page 57).
2. **160 AF (60 irrigated acres):** *Maintain 18 holes, with a reduced water footprint, and add additional non-golf uses on non-golf land.* This scenario utilizes the reduced water footprint philosophy, and applies it to all 18 holes, which is the least number of irrigated acres necessary to keep 18 holes and a driving range open. This option equates to 60 total acres of turf at a minimum, and a total of 160 AF of irrigation water per year necessary to minimally maintain a modified 18 holes golf course. Additionally, this scenario is limited in its ability to generate revenue indicative of an 18-hole course, but allows for essentially the same number of expanded non-golf revenue generators as the 250 AF scenario (See Page 58).
3. **120 AF (46 irrigated acres):** *Reduce golf course to the Back 9 with a relocated driving range, plus five (5) practice holes.* If less than 160 AF of water is available, this scenario reduces the number of holes available for play to fifteen (15), keeping the entire Back 9 in play as is, along with utilizing portions of holes 1, 2, 7, 8, and 9 of the Front 9. This scenario allows for a total of 46 total acres and a total of 120 AF of irrigation water per year. The driving range is planned to be relocated to a more central location adjacent to the back of the clubhouse, while expanding non-golf revenue generators in areas of the existing Front 9 (specifically holes 3, 4, 5, 6 and existing driving range). This scenario increases the opportunity for non-golf revenue generators by utilizing areas that are currently occupied by the golf course, while providing for the most number of golf holes from the current golf course (See Page 59).
4. **100 AF (35 irrigated acres):** *Reduce golf course to the Back 9 and a relocated driving range only.* This scenario plans for a total of 35 irrigated acres, and total of 100 AF of irrigation water per year. This scenario is “worst case,” and greatly reduces the golf course to the minimal amount of irrigated turf, while attempting to provide a quality golf experience. Non-golf revenue generators are maximized and the entire park is viewed less as a golf course, and more as a regional park. This is the scenario

that would be necessary if no additional water is available, or, water becomes unavailable in the future (See Page 61).



Summary of the Implementation Schedule

The plan allows for the greatest amount of flexibility, based on the amount of available long-term water. This plan can be implemented at the pace necessary to accommodate the appropriate planning process, environmental reviews and approvals, and budgetary requirements.

The list of items that can be implemented at any time are:

- Select appropriate golf course layout based on the available water (desired timeframe commitment for known water availability is 10 years)
- Commit to marketing and rebranding the overall park as one, consider name change, promote philosophy of a Community Links®.
- Redesign entry into park to direct traffic towards existing golf course clubhouse, convert current clubhouse into “central hub” including check in for all park activities on property
- Enhance the park entrance to reinforce the park identity and create a greater sense of arrival
- Create new event space between clubhouse and existing cart barn (including a minor renovation to the end of the cart barn to expand food and beverage services)
- Begin integrating non-golf uses on non-golf land such as expanded RV camping, various cabin sites on land adjacent to current driving range and on Dairy Creek Road, begin construction of a connected trail system, mountain bike skills course, mini-golf, etc. to be located on land adjacent to the current clubhouse near the Walter Capps Memorial Grove
- Expand trail system to include the northern most area of park land
- Add batting cages near the current ball fields
- Add disc golf course
- Add a zip line

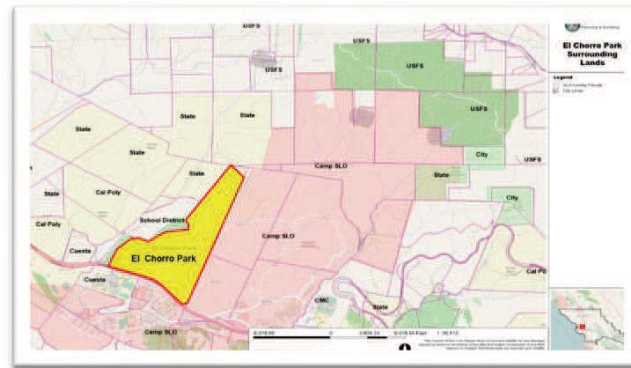
The list of items that should be implemented based on selected layout of the golf course:

- Expanded cabin sites, and expanded tent camping to be located on possible repurposed golf course property
- Relocated range and expanded learning center to be located on existing holes 1 and 9
- Golf learning center/Cal Poly “team building” should be located adjacent to the selected location of the driving range
- Expanded event center/concert venue adjacent to the relocated driving range

Each scenario above has different levels of utilization by the different aspects of the community. The highest-and-best-use option available for the County is directly related to the amount of water allocated to irrigating the golf course. Investment into the facility is critical to its success. Focusing on the integration of a family friendly, beginner-focused golf course into the rest of the park activities is a critical aspect of each scenario. An opportunity exists for the County to take a leadership role in the utilization of the golf facility, while bringing new players to the game of golf, and could allow the Dairy Creek property set the example for other communities across America to follow.

### History of El Chorro Regional Park

El Chorro Regional Park is located on the north side of State Highway 1, approximately five miles north of San Luis Obispo, across the highway from Cuesta College, north and west of the Camp San Luis, and west of the California Men's Colony. The entire park is comprised of approximately 720 acres, with approximately 1.2 miles of park frontage along Highway 1.



*El Chorro Regional Park location map*

On April 12, 1972, El Chorro Regional Park was acquired through a no fee transfer of the property from Camp San Luis Obispo to the County of San Luis Obispo from the Department of the Interior Federal Lands to Parks Program, for the purpose of public recreational area only. The deed required the County to define the uses contemplated for the property and use is restricted to these defined facilities. The uses identified include:

- Picnic sites
- Group picnic areas
- Softball fields
- Game courts for volleyball, basketball and horseshoes
- Archery and skeet range
- Multi-use arena
- Wildlife sanctuary
- Organization camping area
- Stables
- Arboretum
- Golf Course
- Amphitheater
- Overnight campground
- Playground
- Mini-Bike and Motorcycle Area (only until a golf course is developed)

The park has developed most of these features, including:

- Picnic sites including dog park
- Group picnic areas
- Softball fields
- Volleyball court and horseshoes
- Arboretum (Botanical Garden)
- Golf Course including restaurant and pro shop
- Overnight campground
- Playground
- Wildlife sanctuary including trails and open space

### **Water & Revenue Situation at Dairy Creek Golf Course**

A quality golf course is dependent on quality turf for optimum playing conditions. Quality turf is dependent on sufficient water for irrigation. The course is irrigated with treated effluent from the California Men's Colony (CMC) treatment system. Dairy Creek Golf Course is currently operating with 40% of the water that is required for quality conditions expected by golfers. This reduction is attributable to Assembly Bill 109 stipulating that all State prisons reduce their prison population and to water conservation efforts throughout the State including facilities within the California Men's Colony (CMC) distribution system. The course requires 250 AF per year, but currently can only reasonably expect 100 Acre Feet (AF) of water per year, with none available between May and November.

The lack of available irrigation water has significantly affected Dairy Creek Golf Course's ability to attract and maintain customers. Rounds of golf have declined by 36% and revenues have subsequently reduced by 50% as compared to 2013. The revenue decrease is greater than the rounds decrease due to reduced fees because of the substandard playing conditions. The reduced revenue at Dairy Creek has impacted the ability of golf to remain viable as an enterprise fund and impacts the ability of the golf program to pay the bond loan that was used to construct Dairy Creek Golf Course.

The bond loan associated with the golf course, initially issued in 1995, was refinanced in 2002 and combined with the loan for the County Government Center, located at 1055 Monterey Street. This loan was refinanced again in 2012. The debt for Dairy Creek Golf Course is approximately 27% of the total bond debt. As of the end of the 2016/17 FY, Golf will have a remaining balance of \$5.3 M of the total balance of \$19.5M. The annual debt service payment for golf is \$485,000, which includes both principle and interest portions of the loan. The loan is scheduled to be paid in full in October 2027. Operations at Dairy Creek without adequate water are currently running at a deficit approximately equal to the amount of golf's debt service payment of \$485,000. The projected FY 2016-17 deficit for the golf program is \$525,000. If the program continues to operate under current conditions, golf's reserve funding to address these deficits will likely be exhausted before the end of the fiscal year. To continue to operate and meet the goals of the golf program to provide access and equity to recreational opportunities within sustainable operations, Dairy Creek Golf Course needs an allocation of supplemental water to create course conditions in the summer that can generate sufficient revenue to make the debt payment obligation. Any alternative without supplemental water requires a source of external funding for the foreseeable future and/or an investment in other revenue producing facilities to offset ongoing revenue losses.

As stated above, Dairy Creek requires approximately 250 acre feet (AF) of water annually to maintain acceptable turf and related playing conditions for our customers to maintain strong revenues. Prior to 2013, CMC delivered an annual average of 220 AF of water. CMC advised the County, in September 2016, that no water will be delivered between May and November. This plan assumes an estimated minimum of 100 AF annually. However, if that amount is reduced, then the only feasible quality golf product that can be delivered is a practice facility consisting of a range and a few practice holes.

There is no anticipated increase in the prison population and so, no anticipated increase in the available reclaimed water from the treatment plant. Supplemental water is needed and since there is no additional reclaimed water available, water needs to come from some other source. 22 test wells were drilled on the property with no useable well identified. A state water pipeline runs through the course, but no

turnout is currently installed in this line to potentially service the course. There is a turnout connected to the Whale Rock Reservoir infrastructure that makes physical use of this water possible. The County also owns a well (Well #1) located near the County Honor Farm which was once connected via a pipeline to El Chorro Regional Park. This well was a source of water for the El Chorro Regional Park until the County gave the rights to this water to the California Men's Colony (CMC) through a Joint Powers Agreement (JPA) approved in 2003. County Parks' staff continues to reach out to CMC staff to determine the possibility of CMC's willingness to allow the County to use this water for irrigation purposes at El Chorro Regional Park. No other water source has a physical connection to Dairy Creek Golf Course. The only reasonably immediate source of delivery of supplemental water with existing infrastructure is pursuing a water allocation of up to 150 acre feet per year that can be traded with any of the Whale Rock entitled agencies (CMC, Cal Poly or City of San Luis Obispo) for delivery of Whale Rock water to the golf course.

### **Options for Supplemental Water**

CSA10A Whale Rock Allocation: CSA10A has a 190 AF allocation of Whale Rock water. The water is physically located in Whale Rock and is available to CSA10A. CSA10A has no storage rights in Whale Rock, therefore, however much of the 190 AF allocation is not used moves into the storage accounts of the Whale Rock Agencies. Approximately 80 AF may be available annually for use on the golf course. Moving the water to the golf course requires a wheeling agreement with the Whale Rock Commission. Costs would include operations and maintenance at a minimum (approximately \$150 per AF) up to approximately \$1,500 per AF. The availability of this source would decrease over time as the CSA10A grows towards buildout.

CSA10A Nacimiento Allocation: CSA 10A has an unused 40 AF allocation of Nacimiento water that may be available annually. CSA10A would need to exchange its 40AF Nacimiento Allocation for Whale Rock Water from the City of San Luis Obispo, and then execute a wheeling agreement to move the Whale Rock water to the golf course. Very similar to CSA10A's Whale Rock water, there is not storage/carryover right in the Nacimiento Reservoir so currently all of the unused 40AF moves into Monterey County Water Resources Agency's (MCWRA) storage. Nacimiento water costs are typically in the range of \$1,200 per AF. Since there are currently no other customers for this particular allocation, a market price would have to be developed. Approximately 15 of the 40 AF of the CSA10A's Nacimiento water is considered excess so could be available on a permanent basis. The 25 AF balance would decrease over time as the CSA10A grows towards buildout.

Cal Poly Whale Rock Allocation: Cal Poly has up to 100 AF of Whale Rock water available for purchase by the County. This is likely only a temporary availability of water for two to five years at a cost of between \$1,000 and \$2,000 per AF.

### Board of Supervisors Direction

The Board of Supervisors first considered the issue of Dairy Creek Golf Course on May 17, 2016 when Parks staff provided a summary of the water issues, the financial impacts, and the operational options for the golf course.

The Board directed staff to:

- Not consider the use of supplemental potentially potable water for irrigation
- Not pursue operation by a management company
- Maintain the golf program as an enterprise fund
- Provide a General Fund subsidy of as much below \$485,000 annually as possible
- Explore short range, medium range and long range options
- Return to the Board with costs, benefits, and timeframes

On October 4, 2016, Parks staff returned to the Board seeking approval of a short term option to proceed with immediate and reversible installation of event and camping features on portions of the existing golf course and approval of development of a master plan (the current Programming Plan presented here). The Board did not approve the immediate installation of event and camping features, but did approve Parks proceeding with the plan development. The Board reaffirmed its May direction regarding not including potentially potable water sources in the future planning for the golf course.

On February 28<sup>th</sup>, 2017, Parks staff returned to the Board with an update of the progress of this planning process. At this meeting, the Board directed that the plan explore all options for supplemental water to retain the 18-hole course.