

Mill Bend Community Input Survey



2020

**Redwood Coast
Land Conservancy**



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Introduction

This online survey was opened to the general public on August 30, 2020 following a virtual Community Forum. The forum was an update for the community on the progress of Redwood Coast Land Conservancy's (RCLC's) purchase of Mill Bend, the current thinking of the Board of Directors as to how its development would proceed, and to encourage community input. The survey was intended as a means for the public to offer feedback to RCLC regarding current planning. It was announced on the RCLC website, in email blasts to our email list, and in the *Independent Coast Observer*, the local newspaper. The survey remained open until October 1, 2020.

Of the 196 people who responded to the survey, 73% identified themselves as full-time residents of northern Sonoma or southern Mendocino County, while 25% reside here part-time, and three identified as visitors. This can be considered a good response rate in local context. Sixty-nine percent (69%) are at least 60 years old, and 23% are age 46 – 60. Eight percent (8%) are ages 26-45 years old. No one under age 26 responded.

Based on the results, particularly the write-in narrative responses, it seems fair to assume certain characteristics of the majority of respondents: outdoor enthusiasts; environmentally aware and concerned; somewhat familiar with the area; and familiar with RCLC. While this sampling appears to be representative of a good portion of the local population, it is important to note that it cannot be said to represent the entire community. The lack of input from the younger segment is disappointing and can be seen as a call for an expanded engagement strategy. An additional limitation is that the survey was not offered in Spanish.

Thank you to all who took the time to be involved and share your perspectives, hopes, and concerns with RCLC. While RCLC welcomes and considers all community and stakeholder input, it is important to understand that there are numerous constraints that ultimately help shape what happens as Mill Bend evolves. Some of these include the requirements from our funders, the characteristics of the property, the environmental and cultural sensitivities of the area, climate change, human resources, and of course funding access.

The survey was designed by a group of RCLC board members that included Joel Chaban, Robin Applegarth, Trish Miller, Laurie Mueller, Cheryl Harris, Kay Martin, Kathleen Chasey, and led by John Walton. The summarized results will be used as one variable in guiding the board's decisions. It will also be provided to the environmental consulting firm, Prunuske Chatham Inc., as they undertake the first stage in designing the management plan for Mill Bend, and will be made available to the public through various media.

The final, full survey report was 536 pages and the summaries are an attempt to convert much data into useable information for those who want to understand the full scope of these results. Any misinterpretations or errors in the summaries are the responsibility of their author, John Walton. I apologize in advance if they exist. A sincere effort was made to represent the narrative responses in a fair and balanced fashion.

The survey was made available online through Planet Survey. Thank you to Tempra Board for consultation, editing, and formatting of these survey results.

For questions about this survey contact John Walton (jwtqn@sonic.net).

John Walton

Executive Summary

The RCLC Community Input Survey was administered online, opening on August 30, 2020 and closing on October 1. Of the 196 people who responded, 73% identified as full-time residents of the area and 69% were at least 60 years of age.

Examination of the graphic results of the first 12 questions reveals a strong majority of respondents have salmon restoration as their top priority, with continuation of the California Coastal Trail through Mill Bend and across the river, as a close second. Nearly 93% want public access trails on the property and connecting to existing trails on both sides of the river. All locations mentioned for trails received majority support except trails through the willows (48%).

Broad support was also expressed for amenities such as benches and picnic tables (65%), parking (84%), and interpretive signs (86%). Continued access to the kayak launch was favored by 62% of respondents.

Analysis of the open-ended narrative responses reveals a much more nuanced picture. While enthusiasm for increased access and trail development is high, there is also considerable concern for the sensitive habitat of the area. Respondents raise concerns about overuse and overcrowding; misuse such as illegal camping and fires, particularly from out-of-area visitors; and the effect that the influx of people might have on the flora and fauna that inhabit the area. One respondent summed it up as not wanting to “love it to death.” There are responses at the extreme ends of the access and development continua. Suggestions range from developing Mill Bend into a major recreation area to discouraging public use while offering guided access a few times a year.

The primary theme that emerges from written responses is one of balance. The challenge that will be closely watched as the property is developed is that it is done so in a way that enables increased access through trail building while maintaining and improving its environmental value and educating the public regarding responsible use of this community asset. To this end RCLC will continue its open communication with the community as plans develop, seeking feedback from the community to help guide decision making.



A strong majority of respondents have salmon restoration as their top priority, with continuation of the California Coastal Trail through Mill Bend and across the river, as a close second.

Survey Results



Trails

93%

Yes, provide trails for public access. (181)

7%

No, do not provide public access trails; Mill Bend should be for conservation only. (14)

All but one respondent answered this question, the highest response rate of all questions.

Where would you like trails developed? (See next page for numbered map)

87% (154)

Continue the Gualala Bluff Trail (which is part of the California Coastal Trail) through Mill Bend and across the river to meet up with the Coastal Trail in Sonoma County (#6 on map)

80% (142)

Trails up river as far as possible (#5 on map)

79% (140)

Trails following river

77% (137)

Trails connecting to Gualala Arts Center (#4 on map)

61% (108)

Trails through 30-acre forest, upland parcel (#3 on map)

51% (91)

Trails through eastside upland parcel (#2 on map)

48% (85)

Trails through willows (#1 on map)

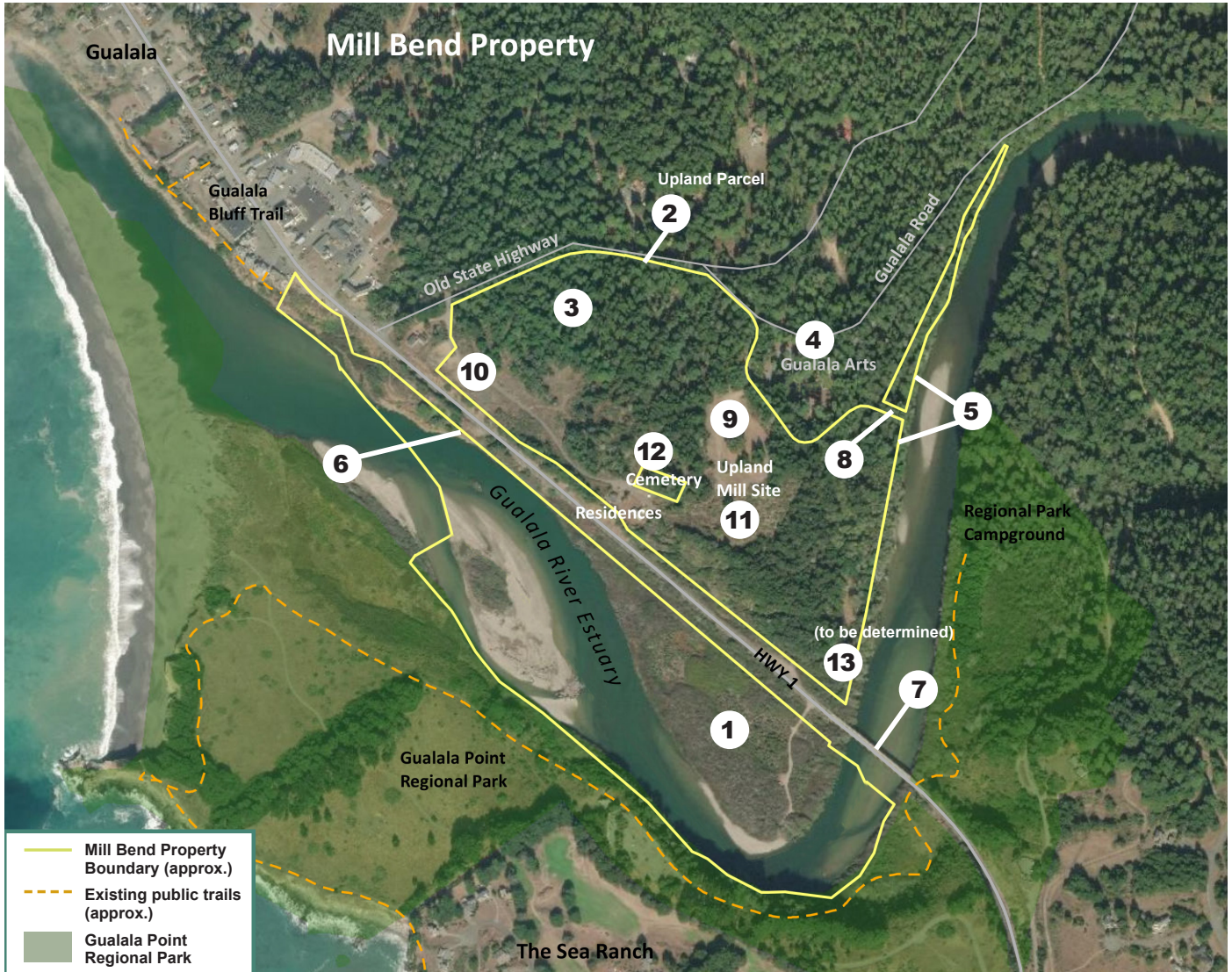
32% (57)

Continue the Gualala Bluff trail stopping north of the river



Trails

Trails in all locations, especially by the river, are seen as desirable, with 87% of respondents favoring continuation of the California Coastal Trail through Mill Bend and across the river. Note that trails through the willows garnered a little less support (48%) than other choices. This is likely the result of the value respondents place on the natural environment and a light touch in any approach to development as clearly reflected in narrative responses.



If the California Coastal Trail crosses the river, where should it cross?

- 69%** The trail should follow the old Caltran's right-of-way up river to a new pedestrian and bike bridge at the original bridge site. (111)
- 31%** The trail should be an expansion of the existing bridge. (49)



Interpretive Signs

These lands have a rich cultural history and great biodiversity. Interpretive signs can help visitors understand the special features of the park. Should we provide interpretive signs on trails and in parking areas?

86% Yes, provide interpretive signs on trails and in parking areas. (163)

14% No, do not provide any interpretive signs anywhere on Mill Bend. (27)

Nearly 86% of respondents favor the provision of interpretive signs while the narrative responses suggest a preference for their judicious placement to avoid detracting from the natural environment.

What are your preferences for interpretive signs ?

94% (151)

Signs should indicate and provide information about native plants and animals.

87% (140)

Signs should provide information about the diverse cultural history of the land.

83% (133)

Signs should indicate and provide information about the geology of the land.

70% (112)

Signs should provide historical information about the local timber industry.

All choices offered for types of interpretive signs drew strong support, as high as 94%, in similar numbers with information regarding the local timber industry receiving slightly less support (70%) than the other categories.

Parking

Should we provide public parking for Mill Bend?

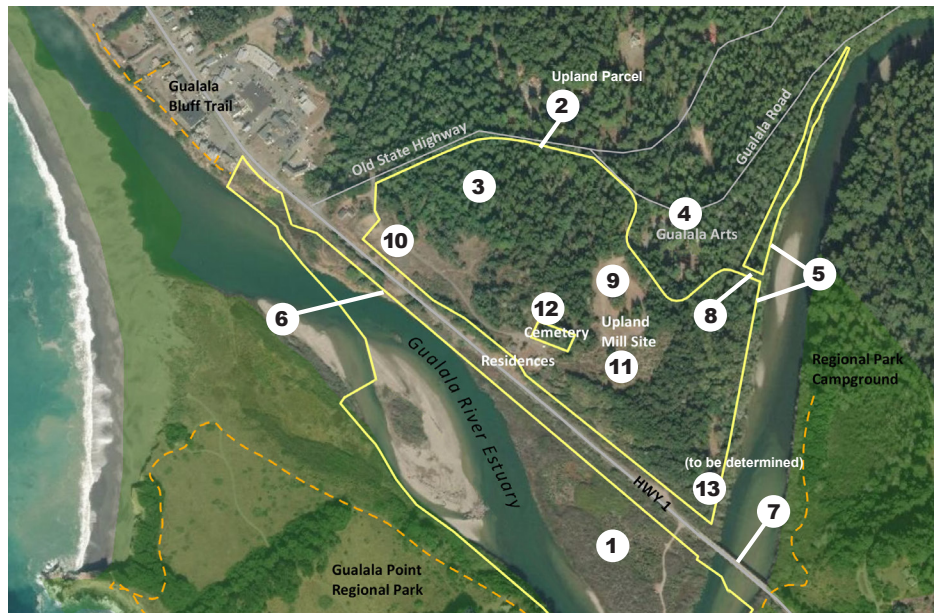
85% Yes, provide public parking for Mill Bend. (163)

15% No, do not provide public parking at any location. (29)

Provision of public parking is favored by about 85% of respondents while 15% oppose. This might be a reflection of the concerns expressed in narrative responses about overuse and overcrowding.

Where should public parking be located for Mill Bend?

Nearly 20% of respondents chose not to answer this question but of those who did, 70% expressed support for continuation of provision of overflow parking for events at Gualala Art Center in the greatest number. Sixty-five percent favor added parking on the uplands.



71% (112)

Maintain overflow parking for Gualala Arts (#9 on map)

65% (103)

Add parking near Old State Hwy entrance to upland parcel (#10 on map)

58% (92)

Parking near trail heads

Public Amenities

Should benches and picnic tables be provided at Mill Bend?

65% Yes, provide benches and picnic tables. (125)

35% No, do not provide benches and picnic tables. (66)

More than a third of respondents did not support these amenities. Again, this might reflect the concerns expressed in the narrative of developing with a light touch, respecting the natural environment, suggesting that placement of amenities must be carefully considered.

Where should benches and picnic tables be provided?

91% (113)

Benches at view locations

61% (76)

Picnic tables at view locations

48% (59)

Benches along river

44% (54)

Picnic tables along river

31% (39)

**Other amenities you'd like to have in Mill Bend
(write-in)(see next page for summary)**

27% (33)

Picnic tables near gravel bar beach

15% (19)

Benches near gravel bar

Public Amenities

The greatest support for placement of both benches (91%) and picnic tables (61%) is at view locations. Amenities received the least support for placement at the gravel bar beach, 15% favored benches there and 27% picnic tables. Taken in context with the narrative below, this can be interpreted to reflect the concern about trash being left behind.

Narrative Summary

This is the only multiple choice question that also enabled comments through selection of the “other” response. Thirty-nine (39) respondents offered suggestions or comments about other amenities.

Restrooms were requested 19 times in this open-ended question with four of those comments indicating environmental concerns with their placement. Trash cans were suggested in 13 responses, three of these explicitly mention dog waste and a suggestion for compost and recycle bins. Parking was mentioned four times in responses to this question suggesting that convenience to a kayak launch and easy access for those with mobility issues were important amenities. An EV charging station at one of the parking areas was called for. Drinking water is mentioned twice with a specific call for a hydration station. A viewing platform/shelter (accessible) was suggested twice and there were two specific mentions of accessibility “please use ramps instead of stairs for accessibility.”

Other unique suggestions included cell service, fire hydrants and fire cameras, allowing for memorial benches, provision of trail maps, signage, plant markers, a NOAA and history museum, and 10 acres of commercial and residential land.



Development

There are many opportunities to develop the park. They cannot all be addressed at once. Average scores of ranked priorities for development from 1 to 8 with “1” being top priority:

Raw numbers of answers for each item are not available in this summary. The lowest numeric rating, 2.44, **indicating the collective top priority**, was restoration of fish populations. Trail development 3.4 was the second highest priority. These rankings jibe with the heavy weight given to environmental concerns evident throughout the narrative and comments calling for public access on the property soon. Removal of the concrete and asphalt from the upland mill site (5.19) was the project of lowest priority to these respondents. The narrow numeric spread between the highest and lowest rated priority indicates support for all options rather than a skewed field.

8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1 0

2.44

Restore coho and steelhead habitat to bring fish populations back

3.38

Fill In the missing link of the California Coastal Trail

3.4

Develop a river front trail east of Highway 1 that connects with trails behind Gualala Arts

3.61

Remove invasive plant species and replant with natives

3.74

Develop upland and forest trails

4.92

Restore pioneer cemetery (#12 on map)

5.17

Develop an Environmental Education and Research Center

5.19

Remove concrete & asphalt remains of the old mill on the uplands (#11 on map)



River Access

Preferences specifically about Mill Bend River Access and the kayak launch area west of the Hwy 1:

Sixty-two percent (62%) of respondents support continued public access to the kayak launch. Another 32% of those who responded to this question favor eliminating parking west of Hwy 1 by the kayak launch, reflecting concern for environmental sensitivity. Fifty-two percent (52%) favor a new vehicle and pedestrian access point near the bridge across the highway.

62% (114)

Maintain public access at Mill Bend gravel bar beach

59% (108)

Designate parking areas to help restore & preserve the area

52% (96)

Establish a new vehicle and pedestrian river access point east of Highway 1 near the bridge (#13 on map) to enable paddle sports and easy access

32% (58)

Eliminate vehicle access to this area while maintaining parking at the pull out across Highway 1



Activities

Which of the following types of experiences and activities are you hoping to participate in at Mill Bend?

| | | | |
|------------|---|------------|--|
| 95% | Walking or jogging | 42% | General play/relaxation |
| 58% | Bird watching | 21% | Swimming |
| 58% | Photography | 18% | Fishing |
| 53% | Paddle sports | 15% | School trips for outdoor education |
| 52% | Native plants or wild flower identification | 12% | Plein air painting (nature painting / sketching) |
| 46% | Picnicking | 10% | Organized group tours |
| 46% | Dog walking | 7% | Other |

The range of aspirational interests for recreation is extremely broad reflecting the wide diversity of project supporters in the community and beyond. Note that these are all potentially low-impact activities.

Narrative Summaries

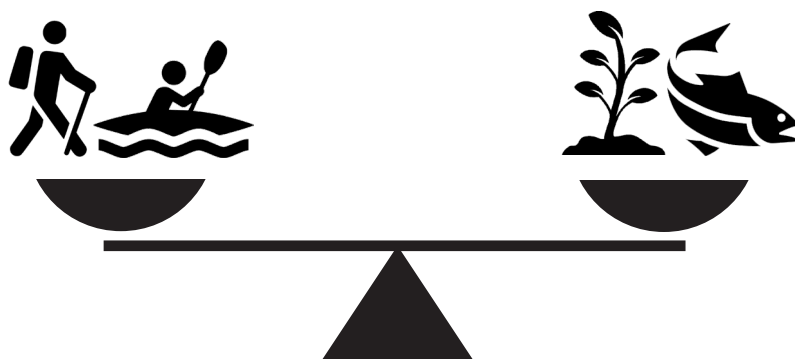
In Your Own Words

The responses to this open-ended section of the survey perhaps best reflect both the diversity and commonly held values of those who responded, 73% of whom were local, full time residents. Simple word counts reveal much about the priorities of respondents. (For simplicity root word counts are provided combining multiple forms into a single count, e.g. “preserve” and “preservation” are counted together)

The most frequently used word in some form, “**access**, accessibility, etc.” (57 times), was, by far, most often used in the context of increasing public access for recreational activities across all areas of the land and river. It was also used with the modifiers “limited” and “restricted” by those expressing worry about environmental damage and overcrowding and, in a few instances, requesting access for those with mobility issues. The most restrictive comment was *“Leave it as natural as possible, encouraging return of fish/salmon; discourage public use, but hold 2 -3 tours per year for those interested in seeing the conservation efforts at Mill Bend.”*

“**Trails**” were mentioned 41 times and the comments were consistent with the priority trail development received in the priority ranking question. At least nine comments included the concept of trail connectivity including with town, Gualala Art Center Trails, across the river to the Gualala Point Park and The Sea Ranch, and upriver with references that are reasonably interpreted to be referring to the community vision for the Gualala River Park extending to *“twin bridges.”* At least 4 responses appear to specifically call out the larger River Park. Many seem to view this as an opportunity to develop a regional trail network. Multiple respondents encouraged trail building and access as an early priority *“in my lifetime”* as these are a high priority and will certainly see early and heavy use. Many of the seniors recognize potential changes in mobility.

While respondents clearly want access and trails, they also want to protect Mill Bend as a community asset. This concern is addressed clearly in many comments and is reflected in the language used: “protect” (18), “restore” (12), “preserve” (10), with “conservation,” “respect,” “sustain,” and “balance” all receiving multiple mentions. The **concept of balance** between access and protection was evident in at least 29 responses. Respondents want



access to the land and river but they express concern of what might happen without strong stewardship.

Perceived threats are broad and one person's threat is another's wish. **Dogs** were mentioned 6 times in contexts including keeping them on leash, allowing them to swim in the river, at least at times, ... "Off leash river area or designated off leash hours for local dog owners," barring them from sensitive areas, and concerns about dog "poop." Some respondents want continued vehicle access to the river gravel bar while others see this as a threat.

The reference to "local dog owners" above is reflective of an expressed general wariness of out-of-area visitors who might create crowding, leave trash behind, and not be as respectful of Mill Bend and its sensitive habitat as most local users. On the other hand some see visitors as an opportunity for prosperity for the community... "entire park idea allows for combined town development and business opportunities in order to serve the influx of visitors and parking requirements well into the future" and suggest that it be... "developed into a full recreational area." There are also mentions of... "combined town development" and... "GPD zoning and other town plan mandates must be revised," a reference to the loss of potential commercial and residential development that comes with the funding restrictions on land use.

Fish restoration was referenced 23 times. "Education" was mentioned in 14 responses including as a means of encouraging public respect for the property. Bicycles were seen as acceptable in some areas. Maintaining Mill Bend as an asset open to "all" without charge was supported. Respondents mentioned the importance of the **history** associated Mill Bend in the context of the cemetery, the timber industry and the original inhabitants of the land. Two people pointed out the increased utility of expanding the existing bridge rather than using the old Caltran right-of-way.

There were many thanks expressed to RCLC and the team of individuals who have worked hard for the past three years to bring this dream to fruition. Community inclusion in the planning process was recognized as a plus. In general, there is confidence that current planning is headed in the right direction. This is paired with concerns about trying to move too fast and the expense associated with the vision.

In summary, these narrative responses reflect a grateful community, very excited about what is to come, along with a sense of caution.

The concept of balance between access and protection was evident in at least 29 responses. Respondents want access to the land and river but they express concern of what might happen without strong stewardship.

Concerns

Most of the concerns called out in this open-ended portion of the survey found their way into “In Your Own Words” but they are expanded upon here. The vast majority of concerns are associated with damage to the natural environment. There are **38 specific references to concern for the sensitive habitat**, including the flora and fauna, that might result from a number of factors. **Growth and overdevelopment** are mentioned in multiple responses ... *“not create a monster visitation site for way too many people outside our area.”* This statement is interpreted to reflect 2 concerns, the number of people who visit, **“crowding,”** and the result of this increase of visitors... *“More people, more destruction.”* Specific threats seen as posed by users include dumping of trash and littering of the area, illegal camping by visitors and the homeless, camp fires, use of alcohol, smoking, dogs off leash, and a general lack of respect of the environment. As expressed in the “Own Words” question, **“tourists”** are implied to be a greater threat than local users.

Overdevelopment itself is also seen as unappealing by some... *“That it becomes simply a tourist attraction and not treasured as a tremendous natural resource.”* The word **“crowd”** appears in some form 8 times reflecting the value placed on the open spaces that the community enjoys. Increased parking is cited as necessary, undesirable, should be limited (as a way to reduce visitor volume in one instance), potentially hazardous, and inevitable with a suggestion... *“Coordinate limited parking areas at different locations on the east side of Hwy. 1 in order to avoid too much parking in any one location and to reduce excessive traffic at bridge area.”* Along with parking, concerns were expressed that development might be too oriented to autos in general with a suggestion that people should be encouraged to walk into the property from town. While overdevelopment is a concern, restroom facilities were seen as necessary, unwanted, and if installed... *“perhaps solar powered incinerating toilets can be installed to avoid excavating for water plumbing.”*

General concerns about the broad scope of the project... *“too ambitious of a plan,”* the associated expense, and timeline of development were also noted. Free access to all was mentioned again here... *“don’t allow it to become elitist enclave. Welcome everyone in the community.”*

The concept of balance was evident throughout responses to the “Concerns” question as it was in the “Own Words” question. The word “access” appears here 29 times, and in 22 of those instances in the context of the potential negative consequences it might bring. It is also used to support accessibility for all. Most respondents recognize the need for development as an aspect of access but express the desire that it happen in an environmentally responsible fashion that respects nature and values it as much as, if not more, than human activity.

To summarize, the dominant message of those who expressed their concerns in the survey is that any increased access or development proceed thoughtfully and carefully in order to protect the environmental value of this community asset.

What else is important for us to know moving forward?

Thirty-five (35) of the responses to this open-ended questions expressed thanks to RCLC, support for the current direction of the Mill Bend Project, and/or thanks for the opportunity for the community to have input. Another 17 responses echoed the environmental concerns voiced in the open-ended question about “concerns” and “own words” questions with a call for balance. While these comments weighted more heavily toward minimizing access, *“Lots of environmental studies before proceeding. Public access based on environmental studies,”* both ends of the spectrum of balance are represented... *“Don’t go crazy over native plants.”*

Six (6) responses urge keeping an eye to the future... *“Be prepared for a future where car use is greatly reduced and many will use transit or hiking paths to access the site.”*; *“more land upstream”*; *“Anticipating our changing future must be built into the plan, including a growing population, warming ocean and sea level rise, drought, and wildfire, all of which spell cumulative impacts for our sensitive species which are our canaries in the coal mine. If the park is planned to accommodate today’s conditions, it will be obsolete by the time it opens as a park.”* Four respondents mentioned honoring the history of place, three specifically mentioning the native populations.