

City of Tacoma, Mason Gulch Public Meeting Facilitation

Meeting Notes

July 30, 2015

Staff and Consultants

Shannon Brenner, City of Tacoma
Mike Carey, City of Tacoma
Councilmember Anders Ibsen, City of Tacoma
Garrett Legue, GeoEngineers
Richard Madison, Metro Parks Tacoma
Lorna Mauren, City of Tacoma
Desiree Pooley, City of Tacoma
Priya Singh, PRR, Facilitator
Mike Slevin, City of Tacoma
Aaron Vetter, PRR, Note taker

Opening Remarks:

The meeting began with opening remarks from City Councilmember Anders Ibsen, who:

- Acknowledged that some residents are concerned about their views and invasive species, and some people want urban forestry to be a priority.
- Recognized that constituents may have competing priorities for Mason Gulch, and assured attendees that we will be able to find some middle ground that balances priorities.
- Highlighted the dedicated City fund created to develop these types of lands, including introduction of more native species.
- Explained that the purpose of the meeting is a way to hear the concerns and suggestions of residents in the area.

Presentation:

City of Tacoma staff and GeoEngineers staff gave a presentation on the current status of Mason Gulch. Appendix A includes the attachment.

Discussion:

Following the presentation, attendees had an opportunity to ask questions and share their opinions. The facilitator, Priya Singh began by asking questions to confirm whether the presentations met City of Tacoma's objectives for the meeting, including:

- Do you understand why Environmental Services needs to create a plan?
- Do you understand the existing site conditions at Mason Gulch?
- Do you understand the City's regulatory constraints?

For each question, more than half of the attendees raised their hands to indicate that they understood.

The following are comments, questions, and answers from the public comment period.

Comments:

- I would like to have the Gulch remain undeveloped because it is the last of the undeveloped gulches in the area, except for Point Defiance. We have enough development, and we do not need trails. I also want to see it restored to pre-clear cut gulch habitat. I would be willing to approach the corridor concept.
- My concern is that we are focused on view, which is important, but also that the Gulch opens onto busy railroad tracks that carry dangerous materials. I would like planning for fire mitigation to prevent flumes from moving quickly up the hill.
- I am a homeowner who has lived here for several decades. I am concerned that the City has not shared the historical context. We cut back trees in the early 90s, and there is no damage that I can see. I am frustrated that I pay a lot of money and the view is gone. I'm surprised my neighbors aren't advocating to do the same. We need to provide opportunities for those outside of our community to appreciate the views. View preservation should be represented by more than just homeowners. We set the precedent and should continue to preserve the views.
- We get a monthly report from the Puget Creek Restoration Society. They highlighted a park with a sphere where you can walk to the waterfront. It's beautifully done. The City of Tacoma managed to maintain natural beauty. I also want to point out that safety matters most. If your house crashes down the hill, then you no longer have a view. Also, trails are fine as long as nature isn't harmed. Adequate access and compromise are possible.
- Invasive species pose a problem. Native species provide habitats and are part of the native aesthetic. Invasive species are a public safety issue because they contribute to erosion.
- I would like to have the unobstructed view back. The City has not delivered its promise of an unobstructed view. We also have teenagers going into the Gulch, having bonfires and getting drunk. They take the deer trails down into the Gulch. This is a liability for the City. Views should be maintained because I need to be able to see out of my driveway. I have not seen evidence of an oncoming slide.
- I don't want trails, we've been in Mason Gulch for 80 years. The deer are a nuisance, but people would be worse. We would love to see the firs and madronas again.
- Nothing in the plan speaks to having the value of an ecosystem. It's important to remember that a healthy ecosystem saves money because we won't have to clear the water. I recommend the City connect with Scott Hanson, who has done a lot of work in restoring ecosystems.

Questions and Answers:

Q: The Management Plan makes a lot of sense to me. My property abuts the area and extends down the slope. Are there procedures that allow me to coordinate with the City for my property in the Gulch?

A: All the decisions we make for Mason Gulch will be public information. The City can share our findings with you as you think about restoration for your property. Keep in mind, though, that Environmental Services will obtain permits for its property, and you must apply for a separate permit for actions on your own property.

Q: I volunteer with Pierce Conservation District and test the water monthly. Mason Gulch water is very pure—there is no storm water draining into the Gulch. The water treatment plant staff say that half of the water is treated there, with the rest going to the Puget Sound. With these conditions in mind, can we make this a salmon stream?

A: This is something we considered. The feasibility study, unfortunately, showed that salmon would not thrive due to maintenance issues from sand falling into the waterway. Another obstacle is that the railroad between the Gulch and the waterfront blocks our ability to develop a waterway, but there may be a potential to create an estuary in the round park area, if resources would allow.

Q: Early pictures make it look like a coniferous forest. Was it originally a coniferous forest? What would the natural evolution be if Environmental Services did nothing from here going forward?

A: We have not done extensive research in Mason Gulch, but based on what we know of the region, it was likely coniferous. The future of the Gulch depends on these meetings. If we do nothing, ivy will continue to wrap around trees, killing them and further destabilizing the slope. We're trying to plan for the most sustainable ecosystem.

Q: I really like this plan. It looks like you are taking care of the Gulch. Things are happening to destroy Garfield Gulch. What can we do to manage development?

A: We have a responsibility to manage City-owned properties, but Environmental Services cannot dictate what property owners do. The City has a process for permitting activities on land that is deemed as a "critical area," which includes properties with a steep grade. In critical areas, property owners need to show compliance and have proper permitting. Developers must also meet mitigation standards.

Q: We bought our house a year ago, and you promised this would be taken care of. I am concerned about the timeline and that residents appear to know more of the local history than Environmental Services. Why is cutting the tops of trees bad? Also, if there are slides, what's the big deal with slides if they are falling into the Gulch?

A: Maple species, where they are cut, grow back with many more stems that are much more likely to fall (due to poor structure) or cause internal decay in the tree and kill it. Less root mass leaves the hillside susceptible to erosion over time. Roots decline every time you cut off some of the above ground portions of tree. While it appears that the continuous smaller slides are not causing damage, they do compound over time. The continued erosion could also lead to a larger slide.

Q: What do we know about the wildlife species and will the Maintenance Plan include protection?

A: We understand the importance of animals. Macro invertebrate testing has happened, but this Management Plan is focusing specifically on Landscape (native plant) management. We believe that

providing more native plants will bring more native animals, but the Maintenance Plan will not address it directly.

Q: Do the large landslides predate the road?

A: It appears that the existing roadway jogs around the old landslide areas.

Q: So the landslides could have happened before the cutting?

A: We would need to look into it.

Q: So there hasn't been a slide in a while?

A: I can't say that. The scope was to do a one day reconnaissance and document potential landslides.

A: One last thing, don't take the fire hazards for granted. Gulch fires are difficult to put out.

Priya took another straw poll asking who wanted trails. Four people want trails, but most (more than 90%) attendees do not.

Next Steps:

Priya discussed next steps. She explained that residents in the area will receive a postcard in mid-August with more information, including a link to complete a survey. The City will host a second public meeting in January 2016. The City and GeoEngineers will present the draft maintenance plan and gather feedback.