City of Tacoma, Mason Gulch Public Meeting Facilitation

Meeting Notes
August 4, 2016

Center for Urban Waters

Staff and Consultants
Curtis LaPierre, ESA

Shannon Brenner, City of Tacoma
Mike Carey, City of Tacoma
Mike Slevin, City of Tacoma
Lorna Mauren, City of Tacoma
Desiree Pooley, City of Tacoma
Geoff Smyth, City of Tacoma
Luis Yanez, City of Tacoma

Brett Houghton, PRR, Facilitator
Tori Varyu, PRR, Note taker

Opening Remarks:
Brett Houghton opened the meeting by welcoming everyone and walking through the agenda.

Presentation:
Landscape Management Plan Update:
Desiree Pooley gave an update on the Landscape Management Plan. The City did not post the plan prior to the meeting, as it is not finalized. Desiree explained the Plan is taking longer to complete as the City evaluates options that address public concerns regarding public views and vegetation management while ensuring slope stability and protecting public safety and infrastructure.

The City expects to release the Plan in early September and will then schedule a public meeting at that time. The permit application process will begin after the public meeting is held and will include a 2 week public comment period. The public comment period will begin no later than 28 days after permit application.

Landscape Management Plan Overview:

Curtis LaPierre reviewed the elements of the Landscape Management Plan that are clear at this time. The key goals of the plan include:

- Improving slope stability
- Maximizing stormwater benefit
• Protecting public safety and public infrastructure
• Achieving a sustainable target ecosystem
• Improving wildlife habitat
• Developing a program for stewardship and public involvement
• Preserving public area views

The gulch is divided into five management units, each with specific characteristics and issues that require different treatments.

Management Unit 1: This area is the thinner outer most band that follows the perimeter roads – Stevens and Mason and the head of the gulch. The area is mostly flat and dominated by invasive vegetation, including Himalayan blackberry. The Plan calls for invasive species removal and replacement with native and/or climate adapted shrubs that are known for stabilizing soil on slopes.
Management Unit 2: Given the particularly steep and unstable slopes and the condition of the trees and vegetation, this area has the most complex plan. It is gridded into 25’x25’ squares to safely phase the work and maintain slope stability throughout the restoration process. Previously coppiced big leaf maple trees may be trimmed keeping only the healthiest stem and a viable root system. This is a departure from the direction the City discussed earlier in the process, to remove these trees entirely, because of the increased risk in slope failure.

Management Unit 3: This area is also steeply sloped like MU2 but has better vegetation health and less invasive vegetation. When the team begins work on this management unit, the Plan describes invasive species removal and underplanting with five species of deciduous shrubs and four species of coniferous trees.

Management Unit 4: This area is where different soil types interface and many groundwater springs are noted. The Plan proposes this area to be cleared of invasive species and replacement and underplanting with six species of native shrubs, four species of groundcover plants, and two species of coniferous trees.

Management Unit 5: This area is mostly flat and includes much of the wetland at the bottom of the gulch. When the team begins work on this management unit, the Plan outlines this area to be underplanted with three shrub species, two emergent species, and five tree species. Any invasive species will be removed.

The rate at which work will be completed will depend on the available funding, resources and other demands on the open space program.

Site Work Plan Implementation
Desiree Pooley reviewed the permit process and the project timeline. Assuming the current timeframe, the process will be:

- Permit received December 2016
- Work in Management Unit 1 from January – March of 2017
- Work in Management Unit 1 and start on Management Unit 2 from October – March of 2018

The City currently has received one and a half WCC crews. This is less than the two crews that the City sponsors currently and was expected for the 2016-2017 work year. Resource limitations like this extend the project timelines for not only Mason Gulch but all city open spaces. The City is considering different but more expensive options to address this.

The Vegetation Modification Request process, which allows private citizens to fund and propose work on City property per applicable Landscape Management Plans, is currently under City legal review. The team will provide an update at the next public meeting.

Mike Slevin reiterated the need for the Landscape Management Plan, and he mentioned the City is working to balance everyone’s needs to provide the best Plan possible.
Public Involvement in the Plan
Desiree reviewed how the City has responded to public concerns in the development of the Mason Gulch Landscape Management Plan, including:

- The City held a workshop on May 25 in response to specific public request, in addition to the three planned meetings.
- Public comment on trails was balanced, with roughly equal comments both in favor and opposition to including trails in the plan. Trails are outside the mission of the Environmental Services Department and are not included in this Plan.
- The public requested shorter plants at the top of slope to preserve views. The Plan includes shorter plants at the top of the slope.
- The public expressed significant concern about preserving views. The team has worked to balance risk management and preservation of public views. To address concerns about private views, the team is developing the Vegetation Modification Request (see above note).

Question and Answer:

Stabilization:

- One attendee asked if there was any consideration in putting in retaining walls at specific, high-risk areas of the gulch.
  - City staff explained the Environmental Services mission aims to monitor and maintain open space areas in a natural way with vegetation. The City might consider a retaining wall if the slope were to fail, as there would be emergency funds at that time. Public Works would also have to get involved if there were a landslide or other slope failure that affected the roadway.
- One attendee asked if the team had considered applying asphalt to critical slopes to help maintain their stability.
  - City staff responded, acknowledging concrete had been used in a specific area to accompany infrastructure location and issues (Water line blow off relief valve and drainage). It was not used to address stability. The City will not use concrete to address the issues at Mason Gulch. Curtis explained that concrete placement would not address the risk of a deeper slide.

Landscape Management Plan Implementation:

- One attendee confirmed the Vegetation Modification Request process is an individual property owner submitting an application to the City to modify City vegetation, using a process proposed in the Plan, having an approved contractor perform the approved work to meet the requirements of the Plan. The attendee also confirmed the property owner would be expected to bear the expense.
- Another attendee asked if private residents would be required to get multiple bids for vegetation modification work, or if the property owner would pay the City who would follow the process outlined in the Plan.
  - City staff indicated it is unclear at this time, as this is one of the factors the legal department is considering.
• One attendee asked what was planned for a triangle of the Gulch in the southwest corner that appeared to have no work planned in it.
  o City staff responded the area was not considered critical, but the team would consider weeding it if noxious weeds were present there.

• Attendees asked if the plant list for the Gulch had been established.
  o City staff confirmed the list had been created and said it included some non-native plants, including those from the Oregon coast because they tend to do well in sunny, sandy weather.

• Attendees asked for clarification on the work timeline.
  o City staff explained individual Management Unit timelines could happen at the same time, creating efficiencies, but ultimately available resources will drive City work.

• One attendee asked how the team would determine what work would be conducted on areas that are “too steep for work,” or those at an 80% slope.
  o City staff responded by stating that exact work areas will be determined in the field. Currently no work is proposed or allowed in areas over 80% slope. Anyone working on steep slopes would be certified and have special safety equipment to work in those conditions.

• One attendee asked if labor was the primary cost of implementation.
  o City confirmed for the most part labor is the highest cost for implementing the Plan.

• Attendees asked if the City had considered looking at grant opportunities to secure funding.
  o City staff responded they actively pursue grants and that having a management plan helps to be more successful being selected to receive a grant.

• Another attendee asked if the work would be compromised by a lack of funding and slower timeline.
  o City staff responded the work would be prioritized so the time-sensitive work would happen first. City staff explained the importance of maintaining the work within a Unit once restoration has begun.

• Attendees asked if the City had considered partnerships with local businesses or community groups, and if residents could volunteer to do some of the work.
  o City staff responded there might be opportunities for volunteers to help in flatter areas (below 40% slope). Metro Parks has a successful volunteer program. City staff said they are discussing with Metro Parks staff on how to partner and create a volunteer effort in Mason Gulch.

• One attendee asked if the City has considered rethinking some municipal codes so the rates do not have to be so high.
  o City staff responded a comprehensive review of the municipal codes is planned for this year.

**Views**

• One attendee asked for clarification on public views versus private views.
  o City staff explained public views are from a public area, while private views are from a residence or other privately owned property.
Wrap Up:
Desiree communicated she would be happy to go to the North End Neighborhood Council meetings if the public wanted to discuss the Plan there.

City staff thanked attendees and committed to communicating with them when the plan is final and available for viewing online.