

## Special report: Big spending, few results in Muir Woods traffic plan

By Keri Brenner, IJ reporter

**Sunday, March 20, 2005** - Six years and \$6 million after launching a broad initiative to ease traffic jams in and around Muir Woods, officials have built a 70-space parking lot, held dozens of public meetings and produced a raft of technical reports.

But little else has occurred to stem the traffic snarl: visitors are feeling crowded instead of renewed by nature, and motorists are still fuming in long lines, according to county surveys.

"Quite a lot of money has been spent with minimal result," said Kristin Shannon of Muir Beach, secretary of a citizens group representing 15 communities from Sausalito to Stinson Beach affected by the car-choked roads and overrun parklands.

Marin County officials, frustrated by bureaucratic delays and red tape, are grabbing their remaining purse of \$1.9 million and opting out of a joint pot shared with federal and state agencies. They hope to start a pilot shuttle bus program to Muir Woods by Memorial Day.

U.S. Rep. Lynn Woolsey, D-Petaluma, who worked to secure funding for the transportation project, says she wants the other agencies to finish their projects within three years or "the remaining parklands appropriations funds shall be returned to Marin County," according to a March 3 letter she sent to the Federal Highway Administration.

Federal officials vow to continue short-term fixes, such as research on visitor capacity at Muir Woods and trail improvements. They say the studies and reports conducted so far provide vital baseline data necessary for moving ahead with any projects.

"It's a challenge," said Michael Savidge, strategic planner for the National Park Service in the Golden Gate National Recreation Area. "We're trying to create a high-quality visitor experience, with less community impact and a restored natural environment - that's our goal."

Since 1999, when officials launched the project to fix visitor overload problems and traffic congestion at highways, beaches and parklands around Muir Woods National Monument in southwestern Marin:

- More than \$2 million has been paid to four consultants - including one whose chief planner lived on a sailboat in Guatemala for the length of the project. Another consultant was fired by the county in 2001- but not before receiving payment of about \$240,000.

- Another \$600,000 was spent on studies on alternative designs to replace the Coyote Creek Bridge in Tam Junction near the Dipsea Cafe and parts of the Tennessee Valley Trail.

- About \$3.2 million was spent on a new 70-space park-and-ride lot along Highway 101 that so far is only helping commuters to San Francisco. Eventually, it could be part of a pilot bus shuttle system to Muir Woods.

About 20 technical reports have been produced and posted on a Web site for the public ([www.ctmpmarin.com](http://www.ctmpmarin.com)). But some of those reports have proved unpopular - such as a proposal for a 400-space parking garage along Highway 101 or on the Dias Ridge overlooking Muir Woods.

Community members say they are increasingly frustrated about repeated plans they say ignore their environmental concerns, such as proposals to close Muir Woods Road, pave over the Santos Meadows area for a parking lot - right near the wells for Muir Beach's groundwater supply - or establishment of a southern entrance to Stinson Beach.

Worse, they say, is that the most important thing - protecting the natural resources that generate the traffic in the first place - is getting lost in the shuffle.

"All of this work was done before doing any solid research on whether or not Muir Woods is already over-capacity," Shannon said. "No one knows how many visitors Muir Woods can handle without further damage to the heritage."

### **How it all began**

Since 1992, transit and trail improvements have been included in a community plan for the Tamalpais Valley area - the gateway to Marin's parklands.

When former Marin supervisor Annette Rose took office in 1992 to represent Southern Marin and the Tam Valley, she put that on her to-do list. Within a short time, she had an idea for how to get it done.

Rose wanted to use a combination of shuttle buses and limited car access to reduce traffic and increase parklands protection around Muir Woods, Mount Tamalpais State Park and the Golden Gate National Recreation Area.

She talked to Woolsey, who liked the plan and sought federal funds to get it going.

By 1999, Woolsey had secured \$1.5 million in federal public lands money for transportation improvements and \$2.85 million in congestion management funds for the Manzanita park-and-ride lot expansion along the east side of Highway 101 in front of the Shoreline Office Center.

Then it was time for public participation. And things began to get crowded.

In February 2000, 300 people jammed into the Tamalpais Valley Community Center to discuss spending the first \$2.3 million - including Tennessee Valley trail

improvements, the park-and-ride lot expansion and replacement of Coyote Creek Bridge.

A parallel effort, the Comprehensive Transportation Management Plan, was announced at the same meeting. The joint project was a coalition of government agencies designed to take a broad, regional view of parklands traffic and visitor access issues at Muir Woods, Mount Tamalpais and surrounding beaches and parks.

The coalition, however, was an octopus. Three agencies were the main partners - Marin County, the National Park Service and the state Department of Transportation. But other agencies with stakes in the parklands - such as the California Department of Parks and Recreation, the Metropolitan Transportation Commission and the Golden Gate Bridge District - sent staff to the project's task force meetings.

"The state parks department is a major landowner on Mount Tam and is part of the study area," said Dean Powell, the county's principal transportation planner. "The Metropolitan Transportation Commission sent staff to help facilitate meetings."

Two task forces operated on the project: a Parklands Task Force of elected officials and the community; and a technical advisory committee, made up of staff from the various agencies.

The other complication was the money trail: federal money came from several different pots, and went for several different projects. In theory, the county held the contracts for all the consultants' work; but in practice, the National Park Service and other agencies intervened on their own projects.

### **Keeping it all straight**

"It was the phenomenon of mission creep," said Marin Supervisor Charles McGlashan, whose Southern Marin district covers much of the parklands and its gateway areas. "The issues that were raised kept getting more complicated and numerous - therefore the studies got more lengthy, complex and unwieldy."

McGlashan, who attended community meetings and monitored the project for several years before he was elected supervisor last November, said "no one person or even one agency was to blame" for the delay in getting tangible results while money dribbled away.

"It's the typical problem of government trying to develop a perfect plan for a complex problem," he said.

Marin Supervisor Steve Kinsey, whose West Marin district is also included in the project, said the money trail could have been more efficient, but county taxpayers did get some benefits.

"I think you have here an easy prey for criticism on the spending," Kinsey said. "But the reality of it is, this process clearly defined the constituencies around the issues of mobility and community preservation throughout Southern Marin and Southwest Marin."

The county hired DKS Associates of Oakland, a civil engineering firm specializing in traffic planning, to begin the work. DKS did \$240,200 worth of work on the joint project before being let go in July 2001.

Powell said DKS was competent in transportation engineering, but the county needed a firm with expertise in meeting both California Environmental Quality Act and National Environmental Quality Act standards.

However, DKS continued on with the county on other projects until 2003, later receiving more than \$600,000 to design alternatives for the Coyote Creek Bridge replacement and Tennessee Valley trail improvements. The company also received \$110,000 for design work from the \$3.22 million cost of the Manzanita park-and-ride lot, which came out of a different pool of federal funds, according to DKS spokesman Tom Krakow.

In March 2001, the county signed a "memorandum of understanding" with the various affected agencies to work together on the Comprehensive Transportation Management Plan. With DKS out of the picture in July, the county hired Robert Peccia & Associates of Helena, Mont., in September 2001 as chief contractor for the \$1.6 million parklands transportation and environmental preservation project.

The Peccia firm, which had a longtime national reputation in parklands transportation planning, was the only bidder for the job, Powell said. He said he had no official word on why there was only one bidder.

Meanwhile, Woolsey in 2001 secured another \$902,000 for transportation planning.

By 2003, Peccia subcontractors had interviewed residents in many of the affected communities from Sausalito to Stinson Beach on what they would like to see happen - and on what they were worried about. Six public "scoping" meetings were held.

Everyone had high hopes, Kinsey said.

"I sort of kept my eye on it," he added.

### **Controversy erupts**

Then, in September 2003, the bomb exploded.

Residents received a glossy brochure in the mail from the county public works department. In it were numerous proposals, including such ideas as closing off Muir Woods Road or building a parking lot on a grassy area that was near the wells for Muir Beach's groundwater supply.

And, there was the one residents feared the most: the so-called "transit intercept facility" or TIF: translation - a parking garage.

"It was apparent to me and my constituents that things were not going the way as advertised," Kinsey said. "The glossy brochure didn't reflect their input, and they couldn't see their comments in the alternatives."

But Woolsey still was able to get more money: in 2003, she secured another \$909,000 in federal highway money, all of which was assigned to the National Park Service.

In January 2004, in response to the brochure controversy, Kinsey helped form a Marin Advisory Committee of elected representatives from the 15 affected communities. The committee met regularly last year to look at draft proposals and review transportation plan alternatives.

At the same time, in 2004, Woolsey secured another \$1 million in federal money for Marin parklands visitor access.

Finally, last Dec. 15, officials from the various agencies presented their final version of four plan alternatives to a packed house at the Bay Model in Sausalito. Unfortunately, the same thing happened again: residents felt betrayed and unheard, said Steve Thompson of Muir Woods Park, chairman of the Marin Advisory Committee.

"The night before the meeting, there was no parking garage on Dias Ridge," said Thompson, who is also chairman of the Marin County Planning Commission. "At the meeting the next night, there was a god-damn parking garage on Dias Ridge.

"It was just a last-minute idea, they said," Thompson added. "That really makes people angry."

After the Dec. 15 meeting, Kinsey said he knew the current strategy wasn't working. The only way, he said, was to pull out of the joint effort so the county could move forward on its own.

When McGlashan took office in January, he and Kinsey created their exit strategy from the joint transportation planning effort, along with a schedule of short-term solutions the county would tackle independently. The new plan was announced March 1.

"One of the prices of trying to do real expansive visionary planning with multiple agencies is that there's a high risk for inefficiencies," Kinsey said. "There's so many different cooks in the kitchen."

This year, Woolsey secured another \$1.27 million for Marin parklands visitor access, bringing the total federal and local matching funds obtained by Marin since 1999 to just over \$10 million.

### **Custody of the vision**

Residents say they are glad the county is moving ahead on its own, but are distressed that no one yet is taking stewardship of the overall vision.

Shannon said she believes the National Park Service must finish its study of the visitor capacity at Muir Woods first - before anything else is done.

"If the most symbolic piece of Marin's landscape is Muir Woods and the parklands and watershed around it, then there shouldn't be a gap in vision," Shannon said, after attending a public meeting where McGlashan apologized to the communities for the joint effort's previous lack of progress. "We asked McGlashan about who's in charge - he told us there is no oversight and no accountability."

But Savidge said the Park Service is already working on various visitor capacity studies at Muir Woods, as well as improvements to the Dias Ridge and Tennessee Valley trails.

"Once we look at the visitor capacity, do a watershed assessment at Redwood Creek, and analyze the infrastructure, then we'll have something we can wrap our arms around," Savidge said. "Then we'll have the standard indicators for use of the park so that it doesn't impact what people are going out there to experience."

One of the studies, by a professor at the University of Vermont, found that visitors at Muir Woods stopped feeling the serenity and peace of nature if they had to look at 10 to 12 other people in their immediate vicinity, Savidge said.

The study is still in draft form and its conclusions won't be made available to the public until this fall, said the Park Service's Michael Feinstein.

However, Thompson said a preliminary report was presented to the community showing that visitors were having a less-than-serene encounter with nature.

"People said they went to Muir Woods to have a type of communion experience with the trees, and that density is a big value for them in whether or not they have that experience," he said. "Do the math: with 1,700 people an hour walking on a half-mile of trail at Muir Woods, I think they're already feeling crowded."

Brian O'Neill, superintendent of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area, emphasizes that even the short-term solutions - such as bus shuttles - will require a joint effort.

"Practically anything any of us do in Marin needs to be very sensitive to involvement of all the stakeholders' interests - and certainly the communities directly impacted," O'Neill said.

Caltrans, the third major partner in the efforts, is also moving ahead with a highway message board project, according to Savidge.

But with everyone proceeding on their own, who will take charge of the vision, wonders Shannon.

"I think the communities don't have a problem with Marin's 'amicable divorce' from the CTMP," said Shannon, in a reference to McGlashan's announcement about the county going off on its own with short-term solutions. "What I'm worried about is, who has custody of the kid?"

### **Too many visitors**

What bothers Scott Tye of Stinson Beach, another member of the Marin Advisory Committee, is not so much the money being spent, but the priorities for spending it. According to Tye, millions are being paid for studies while basic maintenance is left undone.

His beach's restrooms, for example, were targeted for restoration two years ago because of their advanced age and disrepair, but still have not been rebuilt. At the restrooms, there is only one working shower head to wash off sand from the feet of thousands of beach visitors expected this summer, Tye said.

"How do you justify millions of dollars in new planning and transportation systems, when your basic infrastructure isn't holding up?" asked Tye, a former parks ranger and lifeguard and a member of the Stinson Beach Village Association.

While the debate continues, so do the problems.

According to the Peccia study, traffic at a dozen key intersections in Marin's parklands is still on a par with where it was pre-Sept. 11. Visitor counts at Muir Woods have stayed in the range of 700,000 to 900,000 annually since 1999, according to Feinstein, but that doesn't include the traffic that goes to Stinson and Muir beaches or to Mount Tamalpais.

Tam Junction, the gateway to the parklands, takes most of the traffic before it splits off to destinations such as Muir Woods, Stinson Beach, Muir Beach and Mount Tamalpais. The Peccia study showed an average of 33,000 cars a day at peak weekend periods on Shoreline Highway (Highway 1) north of Manzanita in Tam Junction.

"The biggest issue was down in Tam Valley," said Paul Bignardi, a National Park Service transportation planner. "Whose traffic it is, I don't know."

Added Bignardi: "A two-lane road is not supposed to be carrying 33,000 cars a day."

The ancient redwoods at Muir Woods are also feeling overloaded, said Thompson, the citizens advisory group chairman.

"People used to walk on the tree roots," Thompson said. "Now, to preserve the trees, they are building platforms everywhere."

Thompson said he is sad about the commercialization of nature.

"I wish you could just take the words to Joni Mitchell's song, 'They paved paradise, and put up a parking lot,'" he said, "and make that the headline to your story."

#### APRIL MEETING

Marin Supervisor Charles McGlashan will address the county's new parklands transportation planning strategies at a meeting at 8:30 a.m. April 1 of the Tamalpais Community Service District board of directors. The meeting, which is open to the public, will be at Tamalpais Valley Community Center at 203 Marin Ave. (at Tennessee Valley Road) in Mill Valley.

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