5. PUBLIC SPACE & RIVER ACCESS

Petaluma is a city that is set apart from other communities by a buffer of agricultural lands and undeveloped open space. Within the city, publicly owned parkland comprises some 290 acres (or about 6 acres per 1,000 population), with a number of large parks located at the eastern edge of the city and serving as a part of the urban separator system.

Within the city, the Petaluma River is perhaps the city’s greatest open space. Comprising nearly 40 acres, the river establishes a strong element within the city, an opening within the urban fabric, with vistas framed by bridges and shoreline. The Petaluma River serves not only as linear open space, but creates a watery plaza—the Turning Basin—that creates a visual focus of waterborne activity. Although the river represents an open space resource, it is not capitalized upon as such. On the land side, few spaces engage, extend or enhance the experience of the water’s edge. Some significant parks are located adjacent to Central Petaluma, including Walnut Park (at D and Petaluma Boulevard South), Penry (formerly Hill Plaza) Park and Putnam Plaza, but these do not join together to create a larger, connected system.

In the future, with intensification and infill of Central Petaluma, there is the opportunity to take greater advantage of the river as an open space element within the city and to transform it from a functional corridor into an urban amenity. The community has already begun to take steps to recapture the river as an integral part of urban life, and has adopted policies for improving river access. Projects such as the Balshaw Bridge, Foundry Wharf, the River House and the planned acquisition of much of McNear Peninsula as a public park indicate a change in attitude about the river and its role within the city.

Areawide Goals

There are a number of goals that have been set forth for parks and open spaces within the Central Petaluma area. Some of these expand upon goals already articulated in the River Access Plan; others add another dimension and perspective to the role that the riverfront can contribute to the visual, social, recreational and ecological richness of the city. These Specific Plan goals include:

Goal 1: Establish a continuous and interconnected system of public spaces along the river.

The opportunity in the future lies in implementing the intent of the River Access Plan for continuity and linkage along the shoreline, not only through an
uninterrupted pathway, but also through a series of small parks and open spaces. Shoreline open space creates the opportunity for a unique set of recreational activities not available elsewhere in the city—those that are oriented to the water. Shoreline open space is also extremely effective, because its apparent size can be magnified by the adjacent water space. The horizon expands, and the sense of retreat and relief from the everyday urban environment is more closely felt. Water-oriented recreational activities include contemplation, quiet viewing and walking as well as a variety of boating sports, such as sailing, motorizing, kayaking and sculling. Along the riverfront, there is the opportunity to visually experience urban and industrial operations from a unique vantage point as well as enter into more natural environments and ecological habitats that are found at the edge of land and water. The system should be designed to provide safe passage for all users, as well as appropriate directional signage and information kiosks.

Goal 2: Utilize public spaces to extend the amenity of the waterfront inland.

Public space can be extremely useful in opening up the city and creating a greater connection to the water. A series of urban plazas, open spaces and “green streets” (well-landscaped local streets oriented to pedestrians and bicyclists) should be encouraged to tie the inland areas and the riverfront closer together, and to provide a stronger sense of the river on inland blocks. These parks and open spaces should be developed in such a fashion that they have a visual linkage to the river and enhance a sense of orientation to the water. Currently, the existing parks closest to Central Petaluma are concentrated on the west side, and were developed in the early years of the city. New parks should be planned that flank both sides of the river. The planned 32-acre McNear Peninsula park should form the centerpiece of the larger system.

Goal 3: Provide urban public spaces that serve multiple purposes.

The waterfront is an ideal location for city celebrations and special events, because of its central location, available land, and the ability to extend activities into adjacent water spaces. The spaces around the Turning Basin area are already used for the River Festival and other celebrations. However, the role of the waterfront as the place of celebration should be further expanded, to the benefit of the downtown and the community as a whole. The Turning Basin should continue to serve as the site for special events, and each of the individual open spaces on both sides of the river designed to serve complementary roles in accommodating special or sea-
personal events within the community. The Water Street trestle/promenade, on the west side of the Turning Basin, should be restored. This long, linear feature provides historic interest and a very important spacial framing of the Turning Basin. The elevated view from the trestle, the history of community use for walking, biking and river festivals, plus the potential for heritage trolley use, point to the trestle as an important element both socially and functionally.

Goal 4: Encourage a waterborne transportation system that interconnects the various waterfront public spaces.

Ferries, water taxis, and other waterborne transportation should be encouraged in Petaluma, not only for purposes of getting around town, but also as a recreational activity that reinforces the system of parks and public spaces along the shoreline. Linkages to parks, such as the one planned at the McNear Peninsula, should be improved by water as well as by land. Landings can be accommodated adjacent to planned parks, and the activity of boarding and debarking made a part of the recreational experience.

Goal 5: Utilize public space to open up views and vistas from inland areas to the river and the mountains.

While access to the river is limited in the Central Petaluma area, there are a number of crossings over the river, each of which provides its own window to the water and the surrounding landscape. Three of the five river bridges in the core of Petaluma are located within the central area: on Lakeville, Washington, and D streets. In addition, the freeway bridge, because of its height, provides extraordinary vistas to the river and gives a sense of arrival to Petaluma. All of these bridges are designed, however, primarily for automobile circulation. They give fleeting impressions of the landscape, and are not environments conducive to lingering for pedestrians or bicyclists. New crossings of the river should be planned for pedestrians as well as bicyclists, with places to sit as well.

Goal 6: Reinforce the watery open space within the Turning Basin.

Within the linear setting of the river, the Turning Basin creates focal points and presents perhaps the most obvious opportunities to strengthen land and water open spaces. The Turning Basin is a 300-by-400-foot watery plaza that, unfortunately, is hidden behind buildings or visible only from sidelong perspec-
tives. Although Cavanaugh Park provides an opening to the water, there is no commanding view to the open water. Open spaces should be connected by a continuous path, to provide a greater focus on the Turning Basin and reinforce the unique geometry of this part of the river.

**Goal 7: Complete a recreational loop on both sides of the river, including multiple gathering areas of various sizes.**

The western bank of the shoreline presents opportunities for the creation of a continuous multi-use pathway along the water. Although there are portions of the east bank where a pathway could be developed, these are primarily located within the Turning Basin. A linkage on the east side of the river should be pursued to create a continuous recreational corridor around the river within Central Petaluma. A linkage along a parallel path to the existing rail corridor would be especially attractive to bicyclists because crossings are limited; however, care must be taken to design a secure pathway that is well protected from potential conflicts between recreational users and truck and rail traffic.

**Goal 8: Enhance the public space character of city streets.**

A well-conceived urban design framework is one that envisions public spaces connected to other elements within the city, including not only the river, but also streets and roadways. Streets constitute the primary form of public space within cities, but frequently they need to be reclaimed to serve a broader recreational and social role in addition to their traffic functions. In the case of Central Petaluma, many of the streets need to be improved, made more amenable and perceived as part of the public space within the city instead of functional corridors that serve vehicular movement at the expense of other modes of travel.

**Goal 9: Promote art in public spaces.**

The Specific Plan creates the potential for the development of numerous public spaces that could include public art of all types. A commitment to public art within the Specific Plan area would greatly contribute to and enrich the redevelopment of this area.

**District Objectives, Policies and Guidelines**

In Central Petaluma, there is the possibility for a wide variety of different types of open spaces that are distinguished by the context of surrounding uses and the character of the adjacent river landscape. For the most part, it is envisioned that these parks and open
spaces will likely be developed as private development occurs. Specifics about sizes and locations need to be developed at a later stage, however, the general role and potential character of each are discussed more fully by district, as follows:

**Turning Basin Area**

**OBJECTIVE 1: Create a sequence of public spaces flanking both sides of the Turning Basin.**

The Turning Basin represents the primary focal space within Central Petaluma, marking the terminus of the navigable extent of the river and punctuating the linearity of the corridor with a watery plaza. While this area has become the center of special events and city celebrations, these activities are poorly accommodated in the narrow spaces surrounding the edges of the Turning Basin. This plan calls for an expansion of the open spaces surrounding the basin by creating a continuous walkway and more coherent and defined public spaces.

**Policy 1.1: Establish a band of public space around the Turning Basin.**

Consistent with the River Access Plan, a continuous band of public space should be developed around the entire perimeter of the Turning Basin to facilitate walking and promenading along the water’s edge and to link the parks on both shores together. The promenade/public access spaces should be continuous, but will change in character in response to existing edge conditions and constraints. Reconfiguration of a portion of Water Street to provide for greater pedestrian movement should be undertaken, as well as top-of-bank improvements elsewhere along the water’s edge. Constrained by existing activities and buildings, portions of the open space may need to be developed as boardwalks which should be combined with potential mooring areas.

Two new public spaces should be established around the Turning Basin and linked to the waterfront promenade. On the east side of the Turning Basin, a crescent-shaped space (the Crescent Mews) should be created crowning the edge of the water. The primary purpose of this space should be to enhance public access to the river as well as activities along it. It should be designed as a flexible space extends the use and enjoyment of the riverfront, and should be easily accessible from throughout the surrounding area.

On the other side of the basin, a new, smaller public space should be established along with new development along the water’s edge. This space is envisioned as an extension of the promenade, that can be used for gatherings,
Picnics, sitting and viewing of riverfront activities.

**Policy 1.2: Provide for special events and activities.**

The General Plan discusses the use of the Turning Basin as an amphitheater for musical events and special activities, such as the River Festival. Cultivating a role for this area that emphasizes special events and community festivals is one way that the City can recapture the river and better utilize the watery open space of the basin. However, it will be important to also develop a role for this area that serves lively public uses on a daily basis, providing a meeting and gathering place of value to the larger community. A program should be developed for the open spaces surrounding the Turning Basin to coordinate community events and activities that are of benefit not only to adjacent development, but to the downtown and city as a whole.

**Policy 1.3: Establish a sequence of public spaces extending the amenity of the river inland.**

Public spaces should be developed in inland areas and integrated with existing and proposed streets to create a stronger orientation and heightened awareness of the presence of the river. Two key public spaces are envisioned on both the east and west sides. On the east side of the river, a gateway space should be created at the intersection of Washington and Copeland. Called “Washington Circle,” this space is envisioned primarily as visual and passive space that helps to change the orientation of existing streets and influence vehicular “behavior” by calming traffic movement through the area. Connected by new streets to the waterfront, Washington Circle will help open up vistas to the water and to the adjacent public spaces.

In addition to these small parks, a system of green streets that serve as visual linkages to the waterfront should be developed. These streets would not be major traffic carriers, but would provide for local traffic movement and emphasize recreational and social functions. They would also serve as primary visual corridors from inland areas to the water. All of these streets should be designed so that broad areas are maintained along both sides of the street as tree-lined pedestrian areas and lively cafe zones. Pavement widths within the roadway should be as intimately scaled as possible. Streets that would serve this broader recreational role include C Street.

**Policy 1.5: Provide for a new public plaza associated with the Depot buildings and the new transit center.**

A public plaza should be created at the Depot site that consists of public spaces
that make the activities of waiting, boarding, greeting and meeting transit passengers more amenable. The space should be designed to include shaded and weather protected spaces, as well as benches and pedestrian-scale lighting. This space should also include bicycle parking, drinking fountains, and other such amenities.

**North River Area**

**OBJECTIVE 2:** Encourage the establishment of public spaces to and along the riverfront.

Within this district, open spaces can be used to create amenity and focus for residential infill projects tucked in between industrial and commercial establishments. Public access along the waterfront is primarily focused on the western side of the river, joining with the public access created as part of the flood control project to the north.

**Policy 2.1:** Establish a ribbon of landscaped and shaded public space on the west side of the river, connecting the flood control project to the East Washington Bridge.

The open space in this area should be continuous from the bridge to existing industrial uses at Hunt and Behren’s and the flood control project. This open space should include pathways, trees and other landscaping, and should make this reach of the river more amenable to pedestrians and bicyclists.

**Policy 2.2:** Provide for public space improvements near the Washington Street Bridge.

Public spaces should be integrated with new mixed-use development on the eastern bank of the river. The public space in this location should complement adjacent development, and link to the larger public access system to the south and west across a new pedestrian bridge.

**Policy 2.3:** Utilize landscape setbacks to create buffers between industrial and non-industrial uses.

Landscape setbacks should be utilized on properties adjacent to Dairymen’s Feed and Hunt and Behren’s to provide some physical separation from these uses and lessen the chance for conflicts and incompatibilities. These landscape setbacks can include a small access road and fencing, if necessary, and are envisioned as visual and physical separators, not recreational or social areas.

**Policy 2.4:** Encourage linkages from the river to Penry (formerly Hill Plaza) Park.

Landscaped linkages should be encouraged to connect the open spaces developed along the river with Penry Park.
These linkages would need to surmount the grade and be designed to provide safe and easy access across Petaluma Boulevard into the park.

**Policy 2.5: Establish a new public park in the North River area.**

As redevelopment occurs in this area, the City should identify potential sites for a neighborhood park of sufficient size to break up the proposed pattern of urban development and provide adequate green space and recreational activities for local residents.

**Riverfront Warehouse District**

**OBJECTIVE 3: Establish river access and public spaces within the Riverfront Warehouse District.**

The River Access Plan has established a number of improvements for access within this district of the city oriented toward creating a new boardwalk connection in front of the warehouses and all along the waterfront. As transformation of the area continues, new opportunities are created to implement these recommendations and potentially create an even stronger connection into the city at street ends and along green streets.

**Policy 3.1: Establish a specific design for shoreline access within the Riverfront Warehouse District.**

Currently, only small pockets of green space and public access exist within the Riverfront Warehouse District, and they are associated with parcels that have undergone a transition from industrial to new mixed uses. In particular, Foundry Wharf includes open spaces at the top of bank. Given the uncertainty of future use of the area and the presence of the warehouses immediately adjacent to the riverbank, the River Access Plan recommended a boardwalk in this area for continuous access. Whatever the treatment, efforts should be taken to develop a specific design approach for the entire reach to ensure that there is consistency along this important linkage of the river, connecting the larger downtown area to McNear Hill.

**Policy 3.2: Provide for a new public space at Thompson Creek (at the foot of “F” Street).**

Along with new development on this and adjacent parcels, a small public space should be established at the confluence of Thompson Creek and the Petaluma River. As part of this effort, the creek should be enhanced as a natural element, providing habitat for wildlife and special interest to pedestrians and bicyclists. This space should allow for access to the water and sitting and viewing areas into the creek and the river beyond.
Policy 3.3: Improve the street ends as open spaces.

While the street ends of G and H streets are needed to access individual properties, they should also be improved as open areas with pedestrian-scale lighting, street tree landscaping and widened sidewalks in order to create a transition to the water.

Policy 3.4: Establish green connections from inland areas to and along the water.

Currently, the Riverfront Warehouse District is the only area within Central Petaluma that has landscaped, tree-lined streets. Along with the attractive pedestrian scale and mixture of uses, this creates a sense of coherency within the district and connection to the river, even though very little open space at the river exists. Street ends should remain open to the river, with no obstructions or structures (including utilities, such as water or sewer pump facilities) allowed within the visual corridor (or curb-to-curb dimension) of the street. Curb cuts should be minimized, and a consistent planting of canopy trees should be extended along the streets to complete the landscaped image of this area. Parking lots should be landscaped in an orchard planting to create a stronger sense of open space and greenery within the district.

Policy 3.5: Encourage waterborne connections to McNear Peninsula Park and to other public spaces along the river.

In this area of the riverfront, at Foundry Wharf, facilities and landings are already in place to facilitate boating along the river. Given the proximity of McNear Peninsula and its planned improvement as a public park, a greater connection between this area and the water can be achieved by expanding these facilities as public access and shoreline improvements are made. In particular, the street ends provide an ideal location for direct links to the peninsula by water transportation.

Lower Reach

OBJECTIVE 4: Provide for major new public spaces extending from the river to inland areas.

Within the lower reach of the river, adjacent to the highway bridge, there is the opportunity for a large-scale transformation of the area and the creation of a new employment center on lands currently not utilized by Pomeroy for industrial purposes. In this new development area, public spaces should be used as a major structuring element, providing an opportunity for environmental enhancement of shoreline areas.
Policy 4.1: Provide for a major band of waterfront public space.

A large band of open space should be created as development of the new employment center occurs. This open space should serve recreational, social, visual and environmental functions and be equipped with benches, pathways, trees and landscaping. Provisions for boat landings should be incorporated into the overall open space area.

Policy 4.2: Establish an integrated network of public space.

Public space within the southern reach of the river should be developed—not as an isolated fragment along the water, but as part of a continuous network that is integrated into the new development area and improved with facilities for jogging, walking, sitting and viewing. It should be linked to the transit center and its adjacent plaza, and should also be tied to a corridor of open space planned along the rail tracks as a bike trail. Linkages should also be made along the river to the marina to the south.

Policy 4.3: Develop a central green within the new employment area.

A green should be developed within the new employment center to help organize and structure development areas and create an internal focus and direction to the river. This open space could be configured in a variety of ways, but should be publicly accessible and visible for those visiting the site or moving through the area.

Policy 4.4: Establish a small plaza in conjunction with the planned transit terminal.

A small plaza should be built in conjunction with transit improvements along the rail track, creating a place for sitting, viewing, waiting and resting. This plaza should be designed so that it serves recreational interests as well as transit patrons. Bicycle access should be accommodated, with provisions for bicycle parking facilities.

Policy 4.5: Establish a new public park, as planned, at McNear Peninsula.

A major new park has been planned for decades on the McNear Peninsula, which will eventually comprise slightly more than 25 acres of land. The park is envisioned as a natural open space with a number of small boat landings, bicycle and pedestrian paths, pedestrian-scale lighting, and a well-landscaped sequence of “outdoor rooms.” In addition, a portion of the park will be enhanced as habitat with interpretive exhibits that outline the history of the site and the riparian ecology of the area.