2013 Council Study Issue

DPW 13-15 Protecting Burrowing Owl Habitat on City Facilities

Lead Department Public Works

History **1 year ago** None **2 years ago** None

1. What are the key elements of the issue? What precipitated it?

This Study was proposed by Vice Mayor Whittum and would examine the general need, feasability and any costs associated with protecting the burrowing owl habitat on City facilities.

Historically, the habitat for burrowing owls in Sunnyvale has been generally located at the north end of the city on both city and Santa Clara County property. The areas on city-owned land include the Water Pollution Control Plant (WPCP), Landfill and adjacent levees. County owned property includes the Twin Creeks Softball Complex and Baylands Park that is operated and maintained by Sunnyvale. Baylands Park opened in 1994 and contains 105 acres of seasonal wetlands that are not accessible to the public and contain mitigated areas dedicated to the protection of several species of animals including the salt marsh harvest mouse and burrowing owls. In conjunction with the Army Corps of Engineers, 3 permanent owl nesting mounds were built in 1995 in a mitigated area and populated with pairs of owls that the California Department of Fish and Game relocated from a local site that was being developed by Cisco Corporation. Also in 1994, Sunnyvale constructed improvements of the open space at Fairwood School by agreement with the Sunnyvale School District. During construction a burrowing owl was sighted at the park and the State of California required a burrowing owl nesting mound be built as a habitat protection measure. Unfortunately no owls have been sighted at this location since 1995.

The City makes special efforts to make the closed Sunnyvale Landfill hospitable to burrowing owls. The Environmental Services Department, along with assistance from a bioligist under City contract, monitors the number and location of owls at the landfill and WPCP. The bioligist makes recommendations to staff on how, when and where to carry out various activities so as to provide an attractive habitat for the owls.

Since 1998 there have been 22 nest burrows documented by city staff and an environmental consultant working for the City. They were distributed in the following amounts; 5 at the Landfill (West Hill), 5 at the WPCP, 3 at Twin Creeks and 9 at Baylands Park. Although some of the burrows remain intact, including the artifical mounds in the mitigated area at Baylands Park, the last successful documented nesting pairs of owls were at Baylands Park in 2001 and the WPCP in 2004. Sigthings of burrowing owls in these areas reached a low point of a single sighting in 2008 and have steadily increased since that time with 16 sightings recorded in 2012.

The Department of Public Works/Parks Division has a wildlife and habitat management plan for all areas maintained by the City including Baylands Park, that provides for the protection of wildlife habitats including those used by burrowing owls. This plan is implemented in conjunction with the Department of Environmental Services and provides guidance for maintaining the existing natural and man-made (nesting mounds) habitats and best management and maintenance practices to accomplish that goal. The plan is also utilized at Fairwood School currently and any other sites that burrowing owls may be sighted at in the future. In addition there is a wildlife and habitat management plan for the city's two golf courses (although no burrowing owl sightings have ever been reported by staff at either course) that has been certified by Audobon International as part of thier Wildlife International Cooperative Sanctuary Program.

This study would determine the extent of the burrowing owl habitat in Sunnyvale including a review of City-owned property at the landfill and wastewater treatment plant. It would evaluate the efficacy of the existing wildlife and habitat management plans and provide guidance for any additional efforts, and their related costs, that may be desired to provide additional burrowing owl habitat protection beyond the City's current programs.

2. How does this relate to the General Plan or existing City Policy?

General Plan Policy LT-8.2. Adopt management, maintenance and development practices that minimize negative impacts to the natural environment, such as supporting and enforcing the integrated pest managment system; and landscaping in ways which minimize the need for water.

3. Origin of issue

Council Member(s) Whittum, Martin-Milius

4. Staff effort required to conduct study Moderate

Briefly explain the level of staff effort required
Staff from the departments of Public Works and Environmental Services would need to collaborate with California State Fish and Game and a consultant specializing in burrowing owl habitats to determine what additional efforts could be made for habitat protection and estimate related costs.

5. Multiple Year Project? Yes **Planned Completion Year**

6. Expected participation involved in the study issue process?

Does Council need to approve a work plan?	No
Does this issue require review by a Board/Commission?	Yes
If so, which? Parks and Recreation Commission	
Is a Council Study Session anticipated?	Yes

7. Briefly explain if a budget modification will be required to study this issue

Amount of budget modification required 0

Explanation
The cost for the study is estimated at $25,000 and would be contingent on grant funding. Cost is for a consultant to inspect and monitor habitat, evaluate current wildlife and habitat management plans and provide guidance on needed plan and habitat improvements and their related costs. However, staff does not expect such a study to find a need for significant change to the current habitat management policies and practices.

8. Briefly explain potential costs of implementing study results, note estimated capital and operating costs, as well as estimated revenue/savings, include dollar amounts

Are there costs of implementation? Yes

Explanation
Capital costs to construct or protect habitats are undetermined and could vary widely depending upon their number, size and complexity. Operating costs may increase depending upon the improvements.

9. Staff Recommendation

Staff Recommendation Support

If 'Support', 'Drop' or 'Defer', explain
Staff recommends "support", contingent on grant funding.

Sunnyvale currently has wildlife and habitat management plans in place to ensure that burrowing owl habitats are adequately protected and maintained while all applicable laws are followed. The Parks Division has an inclusive policy for volunteers and would welcome any assistance from the Santa Clara Valley Audobon Society and its members or any other persons interested in helping to implement Sunnyvale's wildlife management program, including habitat protection. All potential activities proposed by the study issue request are consistent with current policies and operating practices. Staff supports considering enhancements to the current program if grant funding can be secured.

Reviewed by		**Approved by**	
Kent Steffens	1-15-13		1-15-13
Department Director	**Date**	**City Manager**	**Date**