

October 19, 2024

To

Portola Valley Town Council
Planning Valley Planning Commission
Portola Valley Hawthorns Ad Hoc Committee

Portola Valley's founding in 1964 and Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District's (Midpen's) founding in 1972 grew from the desire to protect surrounding foothills and open space. This shared commitment to land stewardship and public access has been vital to the town and to the region, and it will grow with the addition of Hawthorns to Midpen. Hawthorns also brings a new dimension—historic structures, including 17,000 sq ft earmarked for renovation¹.

The Portola Valley Open Space Committee has followed Midpen's plans for Hawthorns with steady interest by participating in the Hawthorns Ad Hoc Committee² and discussing the project in our regular agenda meetings. In anticipation of the town's several upcoming meetings on Hawthorns, we offer the following input and recommendations.

1. We support Midpen's goal of holistic integration of the Hawthorns³. Further, we believe this requires integrative framing from the start, rather than separate consideration of the Unimproved and Improved portions⁴ or addressing parking separate from activities it will serve⁵. Therefore we recommend assembling information on integration of the property as a whole. An indication of the timeliness of this approach is Midpen's accelerated planning for the Historic Complex's Lower Barn⁶ and its potential implications for the Unimproved portion.

¹ House: 9,100 sf, Garage: 2,200 sf, Cottage: 1,300 sf, Lower Barn: 4,500 sf

² In late 2022, Town Manager Jeremy Dennis requested various Town Committees provide representation to the Hawthorns Ad Hoc Committee; the Open Space Committee was including, represented by Betsy Morgenthaler.

³ Specifically, "Incorporate the Historic Complex holistically within the overall Hawthorns Area Plan." https://www.openspace.org/sites/default/files/4%20-%2020241009_HawthornsHistoricComplexLowerBarnPartnership_R-24-122.pdf (Goal #9, page 2).

⁴ The 79-acre Hawthorns has been divided in several ways. It is comprised of 3 Assessor parcels; and 2 areas defined by the Conservation Easement as "Improved Portion" and "Unimproved Portion" (sometimes as Unimproved parcel). More recently, Midpen distinguished between the "Hawthorns Area" and "Historic Complex".

⁵ At their July and August Board meetings, Midpen staff shared that apart from limited parking in the Historic Complex, a public parking lot located across the hill on Alpine Road would more largely serve the Historic Complex.

⁶ A partnership agreement regarding the Lower Barn has been requested by January 2025. https://www.openspace.org/sites/default/files/4%20-%2020241009_HawthornsHistoricComplexLowerBarnPartnership_R-24-122.pdf (page 3).

2. We support Midpen’s goal of ensuring safe access⁷ and recommend expanding the scope to consider safety for all. Midpen is advancing two of the PAWG’s parking options for Town consideration. Each includes parking for 50 cars, a fire truck turnaround, and toilet facility. They differ primarily in the location of ingress-egress:
 - Ingress-Egress Option 10, via a 4-way intersection at Alpine & Portola Roads
 - Ingress-Egress Option 9, via the existing driveway opposite Roberts MarketWe recommend that those proposals address the nexus of safety issues at the intersection of Alpine Road and Portola Road fully and in a forward-thinking way. How would use of Alpine Trail by school children and hikers, and use of Alpine Road by motorists and cyclists be affected? Has a thorough safety study of the Alpine Road corridor and points of contact been conducted and made public? Would the parking lot serve hikers, visitors to the Historic Complex, both⁸? How was parking capacity determined?
3. We welcome and support the alignment of the Hawthorns Conservation Easement and the Town’s Municipal Code and General Plan in terms of restrictions on grading and tree removals⁹. We recommend that each parking option address those restrictions by specifying: the amount of cut and fill¹⁰, the number of significant trees that would be removed, and any likely hydrologic changes. More broadly, we would request a full explanation of how Parking Options 9 and 10 are consistent with the Conservation Easement¹¹.
4. It will be important for the Town to understand Midpen’s compliance with the conditions of POST’s Conservation Easement. The importance is to understand the guardrails under which the design will be judged.

⁷ https://www.openspace.org/sites/default/files/4%20-%2020241009_HawthornsHistoricComplexLowerBarnPartnership_R-24-122.pdf (Goal #6, page 2).

⁸ At their July and August Board meetings Midpen staff shared that apart from limited parking in the Historic Complex, a public parking lot located across the hill on Alpine Road would more largely serve the Historic Complex.

⁹ “Prohibited Uses” within the Hawthorns Conservation Easement include specific language regarding “*Soil Erosion and Degradation*” page 5, #3(d); “*Excavation*” page 6, #3(n); “*Scenic and Natural Character*” page 6, #3(o); “*Tree Cutting*” page 5, #3(e); “*New Utilities*” page 5, #3(g); “*Building*” page 4, #3(c)

¹⁰ Hawthorns at Alpine Road has soil types (slope wash and Franciscan Complex), ground movement potential (the Berrocal-Black Mountain Fault), which coupled with the impacts of climate change point to the import of land use review. Both Options 9 and 10 require significant regrading / cut & fill.

¹¹ Option 10 sits almost wholly within the Unimproved Portion of Hawthorns where the strictest conservation measures apply. A sizeable portion of Option 9 is also within the Unimproved Portion. In June, at the conclusion of the PAWG process, Midpen staff informed the PAWG that POST’s reading of Article 6 of the Conservation Easement allowed for the consideration of Parking Option 10 (and 9). Article 10 may also be relevant to POST’s interpretation, but we are not aware of discussion with the Town about the “Amendment” clause.

5. As part of an integrated assessment, we recommend that the Town consider connectivity of Hawthorn trails to Town trails in terms of trail maintenance, Town responsibilities, and compliance with trail use rules, and seek input from Portola Valley Ranch.
6. We recommend a review of Assembly Bill 2091 (Grayson) regarding new options for opening Hawthorns to the public. AB 2091 was enacted last month and allows park districts to forgo CEQA if, in opening the park, public access is limited to preexisting paved and natural surface roads, trails and pathways, and parking is limited to disturbed areas. We note that Midpen was co-sponsor with East Bay Regional Park District of AB 2091.

The Open Space Committee welcomes the opportunity to support the Town in making future decisions based on a full picture of Hawthorns, all while integrating the details that inform its parts. At this time, we believe it premature to consider evaluating either parking Option 9 or 10.

Respectfully,
The Open Space Committee

Betsy Morgenthaler Chair
Nona Chiariello, Vice Chair
Terry Lee
Beverly Lipman
Gary Nielsen
Carter Warr