Metropolitan Transportation Commission and Association of Bay Area Governments
Joint MTC Planning Committee with the ABAG Administrative Committee

June 10, 2022   Agenda Item 5a

Exploring the Future of Priority Conservation Areas (PCAs)

Subject:

Overview of PCA Refresh effort, including recently awarded grant funding from the California Department of Conservation, which will identify recommendations to make the region's conservation planning framework more data-driven and science-based by late 2023.

Background:

PCAs are locations nominated by cities, counties, and park/open space districts and designated by the Association of Bay Area Governments (ABAG) for natural habitat protection and open space preservation. PCAs encompass four primary designations: natural landscapes, agricultural lands, urban greening and regional recreation. The planning framework for identifying and designating PCAs was inaugurated in 2007 and received minor updates in 2014. At present, there are over 185 PCAs within the region, located in all nine Bay Area counties. These PCAs have been nominated by a broad range of jurisdictions and represent over two million acres of land.

PCAs and Plan Bay Area:

PCAs have historically complemented Plan Bay Area's "focused growth" framework, where housing and jobs are focused in transit-served Priority Development Areas (PDAs) and open space is protected. A major revamp of the regional growth framework took place in 2018 and 2019, leading to new growth geographies and a broader range of housing and land use strategies in Plan Bay Area 2050. Although there was interest in modernizing the PCA framework at that time, priority was given to critical issues related to the Plan's growth pattern and meeting the Plan's greenhouse gas emissions reduction target. PCAs were largely left in place, with a commitment to revisit after the Plan's adoption.

The PCA Grant Program:

Since 2013, MTC has awarded over $26 million in One Bay Area Grant (OBAG) Cycle 1 and Cycle 2 funds in support of 56 total PCA projects. This funding has helped PCA project sponsors acquire or enhance properties designated as PCAs. A total of $3.8 million for PCAs has also come from the state Coastal Conservancy, which has acted as a key partner in administering the grant program in the East Bay, South Bay and Peninsula.

Approximately $18 million for PCAs has been proposed in the OBAG Cycle 3, with the next call for projects anticipated in 2024 – making this a prime opportunity to revisit the PCA planning framework.

PCA Refresh Project Outcomes and Deliverables:

The conservation planning landscape has changed considerably since the PCA framework was first developed in 2007. Climate change risks are much more acute and visible; equity is an increasingly central lens for evaluating public policy; conservation data, science and mapping are much more sophisticated from a technical perspective; and state and regional policy goals related to climate and conservation are much more ambitious. Staff believe the PCA framework can act as a more effective regional policy tool to advance Plan Bay Area 2050's environment strategies: in particular, expanding access to parks and open space and reducing risks from hazards.

Partners and stakeholders also identified several key needs with respect to PCAs over the course of the Plan Bay Area 2050 Implementation Plan process: (1) the framework needs to be more data-driven and science-based, and (2) it needs to more effectively address a wider range of policy concerns such as resilience to climate hazards and equity, among others.

In November 2021, MTC was awarded a $250,000 grant from the Sustainable Agricultural Lands (SALC) Program managed by the California Department of Conservation to engage in a broad-based, multi-partner and multi-stakeholder effort to:

1. Understand the strengths and weaknesses of the current PCA framework;
2. Articulate a vision for next-generation PCAs;
3. Establish clear goals and objectives for PCAs;
4. Incorporate a wider range of policy concerns into the planning framework; and
5. Develop and/or refine data and mapping tools available to program partners.

This project will evaluate all aspects of the current PCA nomination, evaluation, and designation process as well as develop the guidelines and resources that project applicants need to support high-impact conservation planning and policy decisions. Partnership and collaboration will be an essential component of the PCA refresh and the process will engage many key stakeholders through a robust engagement effort, including one-on-one and small group meetings, a bi-monthly Technical Advisory Committee, workshops, and surveys.

Project Scope of Work and Timeline:

The proposed revamp is scheduled to run through late 2023. Partner and stakeholder engagement will begin in summer 2022, with workshops and surveys following in fall 2022 and spring 2023. Data collection and curation and mapping analysis will occur in two phases spanning summer 2022 through winter 2023, with GIS tool creation and final mapping products to follow. Three interim memos will be produced: (1) strengths and weaknesses of the existing framework; (2) vision, goals and objectives for PCAs 2.0; and (3) the path ahead for PCAs 2.0. A final report of major findings, including a recommended suite of options for regional policymakers to consider with respect to planning, policy and funding, will be released in fall 2023. This final report will also include considerations for the companion PCA Grant Program.

Attachment A provides a further overview of the refresh effort, including more details on the project timeline, milestones, and key questions being explored.

Next Steps:

Leveraging grant funding from the state, staff are in the process of procuring consultant services to support the PCA refresh process. Staff plan to seek contract approval at the MTC Administration Committee in July and envision moving forward with planned partner and stakeholder engagement, data and mapping, as well as research activities during the summer and fall. Staff anticipate returning to Committees, including the ABAG Executive Board, in winter 2023 and spring/summer 2023 to provide updates on project progress and present major findings.
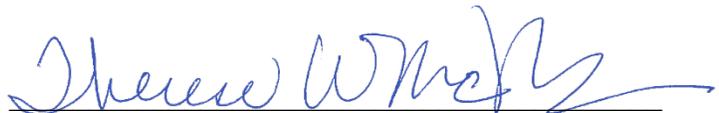
Issues:

None anticipated

Recommendations:

Information

Attachments:

- Attachment A: Presentation

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