

Oakland Natural Areas Program (ONAP)

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What is a natural areas program

A natural areas program strives to maintain the “undeveloped” city park landscapes that require a level of ecological expertise, not just urban parkland skills. This program creates and implements stewardship practices, maintains fire safety (where appropriate), provides recreational and educational opportunities, and improves the aesthetic of the city. At the end of this document you will find a small sample of major cities (New York, Boston, Chicago, San Francisco, Denver, Portland, Fort Collins) that have implemented such a program.

Why a natural areas program

The goal is to change the course of undeveloped, degraded and disturbed lands by nurturing them back into well-balanced, sustainable, healthy ecosystems. By doing so, we are "reintroducing" natural areas values into the community. We believe this recognition of the importance of natural areas, their ecology, and management will lead to a healthier, more vibrant city and cityscape.

The Bay Area is blessed with one of the highest levels of biodiversity of any ecoregion in the world. Oakland, as a city, has dozens of rare and unusual native plants that create a distinct “botanical signature” for the area. Oakland is both geographically and administratively connected with other cities and agencies in the Bay Area and their open space. This position offers the Natural Areas Program (NAP) a special advantage in providing highways for wildlife to other areas. Equally, the Natural Areas Program can provide its citizens rich educational experiences and understanding about the surrounding wilderness.

Natural areas are important for native plant communities, wildlife habitats, geological and physical attributes, scenery, recreation as well as science and education. Additionally, economic studies have shown that property value increase when homes are near “nature”, “parks”, or well-managed natural areas. Climate studies indicate that natural areas can be up to ten degrees cooler than adjacent urban areas.

Stewardship of our natural areas guarantees for future generations the opportunity to understand, experience and live with nature. Rebuilding these areas not only restores the unique style of mountains and prairies but enhances our existing parks—providing something for everyone to enjoy. Additionally, the natural areas we have grown to love need to be managed for fire danger. One of the best ways to reduce fire danger is to

reduce flammable fuels, which are most typically associated with non-native, or weedy species.

Natural areas may include sites with scenic and historic value such as Joaquin Miller's home and estate, exhibit unique habitats such as Garber Park or provide education and an appreciation of nature such as Lake Merritt.

Mission and Goals

A natural areas program typically is tasked with the preservation of native flora, habitats, and wildlife, and how these factors effect the urban environment. Oakland is a unique city and a natural areas program could improve efficiency of the Parks Department, Public Works Department, the Wildfire Assessment District, and Environmental Services by fulfilling some of the overlapping objectives of each of these divisions. A natural areas program would serve the purpose of promoting fire safety, reducing non-native and native fuel loads, increasing beauty and awareness of these "urban wilderness areas", increasing water quality, and creating a greater awareness of alternative recreational and public outreach venues within the City of Oakland. The structure of the program would be such that existing organizations and local agencies would take on responsibility for different aspects of management of Oakland's Natural Areas. The umbrella NAP would serve as a coordination agent, a funding agent, and organization/planning agent to ensure that the program runs efficiently.

Sample projects

Oakland has a number of wonderful natural areas in which many non-profits already work. Efforts could be coordinated and augmented and additionally, goals of the city could be realized with the benefit of a Citywide NAP. **Garber Park** has undergone a large fuels reduction process, and now is currently looking into funding a creek restoration project. One central NAP could help coordinate these efforts and ensure that labor and processes are not being duplicated. Timing is of the essence in many fuels reduction, restoration, and beautification projects, so why not have a professional that understands how this all these factors come together and make appropriate decisions. Other sample areas include **Dimond Canyon**, where recent misuse of herbicides in a project prompted an outcry from the city. **Joaquin Miller** park also has great value as an urban natural area and a repository for rare and endangered species. These species could be effectively monitored while appropriate fuels reduction activity ensues. The **North Oakland Sports Field** is another potential project area where a number of goals could be more reasonably and cost effectively met if a NAP was coordinating efforts and offering insight and professional opinion. There are a full number of parks outlined in the Open Space, Conservation, And Recreation (OSCAR) plan which currently receive little to no attention because they fall out of all of the departments jurisdictions. 1,622.8 acres of Oakland land is designated as "resource conservation" areas. The question remains, is there any real resource conservation occurring, or is the land just being left unmanaged, potentially degrading in its habitat, aesthetic, and recreational potential.

Partnerships

Oakland is blessed with having an extremely active population of diverse people. Many of our residents have planted their roots in this city and they plan on working to make it a great place for everyone. A variety of non profit, and for-profit skilled professionals live within, or adjacent to the City, who could serve as stakeholders in making the Natural Areas program a success. The following is a brief list of potential players: 1) local homeowner associations, 2) local conservation, plant, and wildlife groups, 3) Merritt and Mills Colleges, 4) East Bay Conservation Corps, 5) Oakland parks groups, 6) creek protection groups, 7) local nurseries, 8) local landscapers, 9) local schools providing field-based education, 10) local community and public interest groups, and many others.

Additional partnerships could be formed for educational, resource, and advisory roles, including East Bay Regional Park District, East Bay Municipal Utilities District, California State University, Peralta Colleges, and others.

Funding

Funding is always a difficult issue, but natural areas programs are typically considered cost-savings and efficiency programs by cities that have implemented them. As stated in the mission and goals section, a natural areas program will bring in a level of interdisciplinary which should benefit all involved agencies and subsequently reduce work load. Therefore, some significant portion of the program, at least in the seedling phase, could possibly be funded with existing budgets. Additional and matching funding could be applied for through various foundations and grants offered by agencies, including EPA, Fish and Wildlife Service, California DFG, MacArthur Foundation, SF Foundation, etc.

Conclusion

A natural areas program is an instinctive step for the city of Oakland to effectively and efficiently managed its wonderful 1,600+ acres of resource rich landscape. The potential to get the community out and make Oakland a more wonderful place is possible, but the very best of efforts will integrate public-private partnerships and empower citizens and citizen groups to embrace and enjoy the landscape they call home. By virtue of its name, Oakland's uniqueness is born from the nature that surrounds and inspires its people.

References and other city funded Natural Area Programs (NAPs)

San Francisco NAP - http://www.parks.sfgov.org/site/recpark_index.asp?id=1896

Fort Collins NAP - <http://www.ci.fort-collins.co.us/naturalareas/>

Denver NAP - http://www.denvergov.org/Natural_Areas/

Chicago Wilderness - <http://www.chicagowilderness.org/>

Boston Natural Areas Network - <http://www.bostonnatural.org/>

New York City Natural Resources Group -

http://nycgovparks.org/sub_about/parks_divisions/nrg/nrg_home.html

Portland, OR NAP - <http://www.portlandonline.com/parks/index.cfm?c=edccc>

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