

# TRANSFORMATION

Work set to begin on Mariposa Creek Parkway

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By GREG LITTLE Editor



This map shows the overall concept of the parkway with possible future expansion to connect many areas surrounding Mariposa — and beyond. Submitted graphic

***Editor's note: This is the sixth in an eight-part series about the Sierra Foothill Conservancy. The stories will run monthly through the end of the year.***



Jessica Thompson of the Sierra Foothill Conservancy holds a map for what the parkway will become over the next several years. Also shown is Cara Goger, executive director of the Mariposa County Arts Council. Photo by Greg Little

For many people, it might be hard to imagine what an overgrown piece of Mariposa land is going to look like in a few years.

But it's not hard for three local women to imagine the future; especially these three who have worked tirelessly for years in an effort to bolster the Mariposa Creek Parkway into what they believe will be a major attraction for locals and visitors alike.

Bridget Fithian, executive director of the Sierra Foothill Conservancy (SFC), Jessica Thompson, operations manager at SFC and Cara Goger, executive director of the Mariposa County Arts Council have all been heavily involved in shaping the future of the parkway.

And it shows.



The parkway's history dates back decades and the first part of it was built in the 1990s. That part is familiar to almost all local residents as it starts at the Arts Park and ends not far away on Stroming Road and 8th Street.



Shown are Himalayan blackberries which have clogged the parkway for years. Crews will be descending on the site in the coming weeks to clear out the mess. Photo by Greg Little

But the times, they are a changing.

"It's been a long gap until today," said Fithian.

However, that gap is closing rapidly and Fithian gives full credit to a collaborative effort of many local groups.

Besides her own, she said Mariposa County officials, the Arts Council and the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation have all been instrumental in developing the future of the parkway and what impacts that will have on this region.

“The county has been awesome over the last three years,” said Fithian.

She said the Mariposa County Board of Supervisors has “demonstrated leadership and commitment” when it comes to the parkway. She also credits Mariposa County Chief Administrative Officer Dallin Kimble and the entire Mariposa County Planning Department for assisting in the progress.





Bridget Fithian, executive director of the Sierra Foothill Conservancy, points out issues with some dead trees along where the Mariposa Creek Parkway will be expanded. Photo by Greg Little

The conservancy, which is mostly known for developing conservation easements to preserve areas into the future, is playing a different role in this case.

SFC facilitated the purchase of three parcels of land located along Mariposa Creek that will ultimately be home to an extended Mariposa Creek Parkway as well as other trails and much more in that area of the town. They helped the county in purchasing 400 acres of land which lies east of 8th Street, which is now the end of the parkway.

Fithian said there was a major use of state grant funding to secure the money to purchase those properties.

The Arts Council, too, is playing a major role, said Fithian, and their two groups played a major part in “making it actionable on the ground.”

What all of that means, she said, is allowing the next phase of the project to begin, which is the “actual design and implementation of the plan on the ground.”

In addition, Fithian said the role of the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation, a group trying hard to get federal recognition, is crucial in the overall development of the parkway.

The tribe, she said, is working on developing a space that will incorporate a lot of its history as well as native plans and cultural knowledge to be shared to those who utilize the parkway.

This next phase will be a major step as bids are already out for cleaning up the area, part of which is a well-known homeless encampment located behind the post office and Pioneer Market.

Fithian said officials at the county landfill secured a grant to do cleanup work in that area — and it will be a major task.

She called it a “hazmat situation,” noting because of the nature of the area, there could be everything from syringes to human waste. There are also invasive species of plants and much more which will be part of the undertaking to start clearing up that land, which is located with the town area of Mariposa.

Two of the major issues when it comes to plants are the Himalayan blackberries and the tree of heaven.

Crews will work to remove as much of those species as possible, she said, and it won’t be an easy task.

She said members of the California Conservation Corps will bring in hand crews this fall to begin the process. One of the first steps will be to remove some of the large tree limbs, and even trees, which are dead and pose a hazard to anyone walking in that area.

Another group, the Calaveras Healthy Impact Solutions, has also been secured to assist with the process, said Fithian, and they will be hiring tribal members as part of the program.

"That's one of the things I like about the program," said Fithian. "It is providing employment."

Gary Miltmore, stewardship program manager for SFC, said he is "excited" to have the two groups involved in the project.

"It is a win-win to be able to support great community job training programs while also restoring the environment," said Miltmore.

He said the vegetation will be piled for burning later in the winter.

Fithian said Jimbo Sorga, a tribal member who is a recent retiree from CAL FIRE will be working to develop plans to do controlled burning in the area as part of the overall cleanup process. He will be coordinating with CAL FIRE and County Fire officials as the plans are developed and implemented.

"He is the perfect person to be this liaison between the project and the tribe and CAL FIRE," said Tara Fouch-Moore, secretary of the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation.

She said the big question was how to do a burn in town, but with Sorga in the mix, it has helped.

"It was beyond the scope of what the tribe has resources to do," said Fouch-Moore.

"Now, the tribe will have a strong co-management part in it."

She also said fire is an integral part of the history of the tribe, dating back thousands of years.

Fouch-Moore said there was "this sort of myth of the wilderness being perfect, but it wasn't."

She said the burning “was very intentional” to help the landscape and the people at the time used it to their advantage “to get the results they wanted.”

That included being able to make straighter sticks and to get more acorn yields by utilizing smoke, she said.

Then, said Fouch-Moore, it was “suddenly stopped” when California became a state. She believes projects like this can remind people of how fire was used for good for generations.

“It is not just a tribal perspective and cultural perspective, but it is for the landscape,” she said.

For Goger, seeing the expanding of the parkway is something she has been waiting to see for a long time.

“I’m so excited,” said Goger. “It’s going to be a massive asset for the community.”

She said the vision which has been developed for the parkway “celebrates the landscape” and also promotes “civic engagement.”

In addition, Goger said a major point is how the tribe is being brought into the overall project and taking a lead role.

“It is an integration and partnership with the tribal community,” said Goger. “This project is really exciting to me.”

It is also part of the Arts Council’s overall goal of having a major public arts project for everyone to enjoy.

Not only does it restore the land, she said, but it will allow them to “tell the story of the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation,” she said. And that includes the “larger stories” about the tribe, which has been in this region for thousands of years, well before the settling of the west.

Another major part of the project, she said, is it allows for the removal of dangerous fuel loads as well as allowing for “more ecological knowledge” to be shared.



Fouch-Moore said the tribe is happy to be partnering with the other groups.

“The mindset is changing and it is really fortunate,” she said. “This is our special place and we want to preserve it. Having local partners is so crucial and having the county get on board is great, especially with people who are creative. It is an important collaboration.”

In another major advancement for the Arts Council, Goger said they applied for a major grant through the California Arts Council — and got the funding.

Goger said only six entities out of 400 which applied were awarded funding.

And in this case, it’s not a typical arts grant, which generally range around \$20,000 or so. This one, she said, is \$140,000 over three years. It also goes along with the creative placemaking initiative which has been underway in the county for several years.

“Creative placemaking can help tell the story,” said Goger. “We want to create lasting pieces of public art.”

That part of the overall plan is still being developed, she said, and they are working closely with the tribe before anything is finalized.

“We like the idea of showcasing the tribe in the space,” said Goger. “And supporting landscape restoration.”

For Goger, her journey has been long and took her away from her hometown of Mariposa for years before she came back and took over the helm of the Arts Council. Seeing this project develop has been a longtime goal of Goger — and it shows.

She said the parkway will be an attraction for everyone — visitors and local residents alike.

And she added one of the big issues which is in development is central to the future vision for Mariposa: “How to make Mariposa a place to capture the imagination.”

All of that is playing out right now and even includes the current downtown restoration project, which Goger said will almost certainly transform the look of the historic downtown area.

“It is a whole of infrastructure project,” said Goger, saying even some of the changes coming through the project could be considered art.

That can include the historic street lights which will be featured as well as the accessibility which is part of the ongoing project.

Another aspect she pointed out is how far-reaching the parkway project can be, including reducing fire danger and contributing to a healthier population with walking, running and biking opportunities expanding as the project grows.

The eventual goal of the project is far-reaching and would eventually include the Merced River Trail as well as access to the Stockton Creek Preserve, a large area of land preserved with hiking trails and other recreational opportunities. Both the preserve and the parkway are adjacent to, and some within, the borders of Mariposa.

For Fithian, that is major point as it will allow much more access for locals and visitors alike.

As an example, the Creekside Terrace project which will provide housing is located along what will eventually be the extended part of the Mariposa Creek Parkway. Once completed, people living in that area will be able to access the trail and can walk to the grocery store, post office and everything else in Mariposa because it will be connected.

“It will serve a new community,” said Fithian.

For Thompson, who specializes in plant life and wildlife, opening up that part of Mariposa for public use will do nothing but help sustain the area.

She has been leading the effort in the past couple of years of finding out exactly what is in that area and how to proceed when it comes to development.

She said there is an abundance of wildlife, from birds to aquatic life to turkeys and so much more.

As it stands now, Thompson said the “number of animals” and the “diversity of animals” decreases as the undergrowth and dense brush thickens along the trail.

Once it is restored, she said plant life and animal life will thrive in all of the area, something she believes is critical.

Thompson said during the surveys which have been conducted, they have identified 36 species of birds, some migratory and some who live there all year.

There are newts in the space, as well as frogs and bats and so much more. They see a lot of turkeys and have spotted bobcats and foxes.

"It is really special to have such a wildlife population," said Thompson. "I am really excited to see these resources utilized. And it is a brilliant showcase of community conservation."

Goger said not only is this project crucial for the future of Mariposa, officials from other areas are also watching how it develops.

"This is a demonstration project for other arts councils," she said. "The art world, their eyes are on this."

And that goes to an even deeper question, one which the art world cannot fully answer: What is art?

For Goger, art comes in many forms, including being integrated in everyday being.

"I love art in service," said Goger, describing it as "the gooey thing that touches everything."

"How can art lift that up?" she asks herself.

Then she answers: "Art becomes transformative."

Indeed, it seems her vision is one that has been bubbling for a long time and now, for her and those who have been working on this for years, it is becoming a reality.

The same is true from the tribal perspective, said Fouch-Moore.

"This is not only our backyard, but it is also because the creek is really important to the tribe," said Fouch-Moore. "It was a major point of subsistence."



She said “our elders grew up on that creek. They would follow it to town. The remember it when it was much healthier.”

For more information about the Sierra Foothill Conservancy visit [sierrafoothill.org](http://sierrafoothill.org).

For more information on the arts council, visit [www.mariposaartscouncil.org](http://www.mariposaartscouncil.org).

For more information on the Southern Sierra Miwuk Nation,  
visit [southernsierramiwuknation.org](http://southernsierramiwuknation.org).