



July 25, 2005

City of Chico
Park Commissioners
411 Main Street
Chico, CA 95928

Dear Members of the Bidwell Park and Playground Commission,

Friends of Bidwell Park would like to thank you for asking us to express our concerns regarding the current location of the Disc Golf Courses. We would first like to outline our general concerns, followed by a list of specific questions regarding cost, management and intent. In conclusion, we would like to offer some alternative ideas.

General Concerns

First and foremost, is our belief that by building recreational facilities (thus altering the natural environment for the sake of sporting facilities) in Bidwell Park breaks more than one commitment to the public by the City with regards to the purpose and treatment of Bidwell Park.

1) *Annie Bidwell's terms and conditions of the Park's purpose and origin.* One hundred years ago, the City of Chico promised Annie Bidwell that the City would preserve and protect "this one spot to nature, inviolate and through all time." We don't think that these historical purposes have run their course; rather we feel that this cornerstone and true origin of Bidwell Park's purpose is even more relevant to the daily lives of Chico residents today.

2) *The City of Chico's General Plan designates Bidwell Park as a 'Resource Conservation Area'.* While certain *pre-existing* developed facilities of various sorts occupy RCA lands, we challenge the notion that this justifies the development of lands that are the epitome of fragile, unfragmented, aesthetically magnificent habitat, which we certainly consider the Highway 32 site to be.

We are concerned that the City is no longer committed to designating Upper Park as Resource Conservation Area, and that conservation in Bidwell Park generally is a low priority.

3) OS-1 Zoning. This zoning designation does not allow for the development of sports facilities. A super-majority of Council votes is required to change this designation, which indicates the value of undeveloped open space to Chico and cities like ours.

Having open space is what separates us from the endless sea of ‘suburbia’ that plagues other parts of our state, and the legislative designation of this type of zone is specifically set up to create a balance between the untamed march of economic forces and our own quality of life. Open space provides the contiguous habitat necessary for many native species that would otherwise disappear from our local picture. Many of these species are migratory and so our commitment is but a small part of a much larger picture (regional).

4) 1990 Bidwell Park Master Management Plan. We are not comfortable with the project’s planning process that ignored the language and spirit of Bidwell Park’s own Management Plan, and feel a return to that Plan’s original intention is of paramount concern for the long term viability of the Bidwell Park experience. See pages 1, 5, 10, 12, 13, 27, 30, 38, 53, 55, 58 of the 1990 MMP for specific examples.

The 1990 MMP’s perhaps most visionary point is contained in its several objectives and recommendations regarding the interrelationship between the *need* to provide our community with developed recreational facilities *outside* of Bidwell Park, while focusing on passive recreation and natural resource preservation inside of Bidwell Park.

No doubt you are aware of the City’s current challenge regarding the funding of ‘community style’ parks. We support the City’s efforts to meet that challenge. It is a challenge that other municipalities across the country face every day as well, some quite successfully.

What we find both frightening and unacceptable is the notion that Bidwell Park’s natural qualities – both actual habitat and aesthetic value– should suffer as a result of less creative solutions, absorbing the footprint of yet another well-intentioned activity.

While we agree that recreational facilities are an essential component of our community, we are uncomfortable with the trend of continuing to replace the native vegetation and wildlife in Bidwell Park with manicured fields and courses. We believe these recreational facilities are better suited for centrally located areas that are urban, rather than wild by nature, thus enhancing the qualities of an already populated area.

We believe that by opening Upper Park to the development of the disc golf courses, it will in turn further open the door to other user groups waiting to grab a little piece of the pie. The Park Director has already suggested we consider the development of

an “extreme mountain bike course” and we are aware that an air gun group has also recently ask the City for help in obtaining their own course.

Other concerns that stem from the history of the proposed disc golf facility:

We are not comfortable with the fact that the City allowed an individual interest to develop their proposed project before environmental review was complete (or even started), and before the site was formally planned. Granted, the City was unaware of the significant impacts that would arise from the sport’s popularity. This, however, raises even more concern if the City cannot recognize the potential impacts that come with increased park use – an inevitability with our growing population – that trigger the need to *more* carefully manage Bidwell Park. Recognizing this, it is difficult for us to sympathize with the City regarding course development.

Concerns over Park policy are accompanied by our concerns over the natural resources of the proposed project site, which we consider to be very fragile by nature given the thin erosion-prone soils. These concerns– especially soils, but also habitat issues and native plant populations including ancient Blue Oak trees– are amplified when the long-term view of the site is taken into account.

Allowing the disc golf facility thus far has significantly affected the resources on the site; native plant and wildlife diversity is declining, rare populations are declining, soil compaction is extensive and visible from aerial photographs. Oak trees on the fairways are being damaged either directly from being used as an obstacle or cumulatively from soil compaction. Furthermore, this facility severely fragments the biological communities of the area and also increases the overall edge effect on Upper Park. Disturbed areas become vulnerable to the invasion of more aggressive non-native plants, thus jeopardizing this area and adjacent areas of Upper Park that are still dominated by native species.

We also consider the potential for wildfire to be increased. Hundreds of cigarettes butts can be found on the site and several fires have been reported at the site in the last few years. A catastrophic fire would forever alter Bidwell Park. A wildfire in this area could also threaten adjacent homes as well as the California State University’s Big Chico Creek Ecological Reserve.

We do, however, recognize the valid desires of the disc golf community in seeking an officially acknowledged course site in the community, and encourage the City to seek alternative course sites *outside* of Bidwell Park. In fact, the need to discuss alternatives to the Highway 32 site as part of the consideration of the project has been sorely missed. We offer a list of potential sites below.

Questions

Management and Finance

1. Who will manage the facilities? The City, CARD or some yet to be formed organization?
2. Will there be a lease? If so, what will be the terms and conditions? How will compliance be measured and what actions will be taken for non-compliance?
3. How much will it cost to build the course?
4. How much will it cost to mitigate for impacts (including 5 years of monitoring)?
5. What is the projected yearly maintenance cost (including visits to pick up trash, open and close the gate every day, provide and maintain restrooms, provide law enforcement, etc.)? What will be the source of this funding? Conservatively, We estimate this could cost as much as \$35,000/year.
6. How will the funding of the Disc Golf courses impact the fiscal needs of other park maintenance activities?
7. Will the City charge a course fee to pay for the maintenance?
8. Will the courses be used for tournaments? Large or small? If so, what will be the conditions for tournaments as per 1990 MMP page 30, 2.3, objective 12?
9. Will sponsors be able to post signs on the course?
10. What will the parking area size be? Will the parking area be able to accommodate tournaments?
11. Because the courses are somewhat remote and require motor vehicle access, will the City build another course in town?
12. Would the City be obligated to provide another course in the event a fire destroyed the “obstacles” (Blue Oak trees, shrubs) in the existing courses?
13. Will the City be responsible for repairing/replacing items vandalized or stolen?

Enforcement and Safety

14. Will Cal Trans require a turn-off lane for safe entry into the parking area? If so, what would the cost be? Will Cal Trans require a merge lane for traffic leaving the course, heading towards Chico? If so, what would the cost be?
15. How does the City propose to control the prevalent alcohol consumption and smoking on the courses?
16. How does the City intend to control the unauthorized expansion of the course(s) and illegal benches?

Impacts to other users and site design

17. Will the course itself be available to other users? (Picnics, people who want to enjoy the view, memorial benches, educational purposes, other sports)?
18. Will areas of the 40-acre site be committed to uses other than the sport of disc golf (for instance: passive recreation)?
19. How will other uses be designed into the site, in terms of flow and avoidance of conflict?

20. What is the targeted user group for the proposed project? Beginner/Intermediate or Advanced/Expert?

Mitigation and natural resource management

21. What is the City's vision with regards to long-term use intensity? Is the City willing to support the courses no matter the number of players and impacts, or does the City hope to limit the use intensity by an unknown mechanism?
22. How will the public be guaranteed that agreed-upon mitigation will be enforced? Chico does not have a good record of following through on required mitigation monitoring. Who will pay for the initial mitigation and ongoing monitoring?
23. Will the City pay into the Swainson's hawk mitigation fund? If so, how much?
24. Is it the City's intention to abandon the habitat values within the facility's footprint? Or will an attempt be made to retain some habitat value for some species? (i.e. Blue Oak regeneration, bird forage, etc.) If the latter, how will this be accomplished?

Possible Alternative Sites

1. 1st and Verbena Park - originally slated for a developed recreational park, the City Council recently (1 year ago?) turned its back on BPMMP recommendations to provide off-site developed recreation to relieve pressures on Bidwell Park when they agreed with neighbors to make this Park a natural style park. Still, this is a great spot.
2. Sycamore Channel - golfers thought it too featureless - Man-made obstacles could enhance site.
3. Comanche Creek - this property is ideal for a City Park.
4. Portions of the Tree Improvement Center off the Skyway - owned by the Forest Service. Forest Service may sale or lease portions to the City for open space.
5. City-owned Humboldt Road Burn Dump - Close to schools and bike routes, adjacent to private burn dump where the state may not allow residential structures; a potential buy-back/merge. Once again, man-made obstacles could be a neat fit.
6. Diamond Match Property - the general plan calls for developments to carry a City Park component, if the developer was willing to include Disc Golf?
7. Abandoned railroad right-of-way - also near Diamond Match and Comanche Creek - somewhat linear, but in conjunction with others...big enough?
8. Henshaw and De Garmo Parks - if a few D.G. baskets can be creatively installed here, it would take some pressure away from the Hwy 32 sites. As Chico grows, the dispersement of recreational opportunities becomes important.

9. Community Park - turf installed to handle the foot traffic, centrally located and already committed to developed recreational endeavors. Several disc golf courses in California are on the perimeter of this type of park. Challenges for disc golfing can be developed.
10. Share with existing golf course. This site is already supports 18 fairways, has parking, deep soils and greens which are resistant to compaction and erosion.
11. Middle Park, north of Five Mile - not a good choice by any stretch, but far better than the thin Tuscan ridge top soils off Hwy 32.
12. Lower Park between Caper Acres and Hwy 99 - any Bidwell Park location for a developed disc golf course is dubious but the almost total domination by invasive plants in the understory at this location calls out for a hands-on change for the better.

We recommend a location with deep topsoil such as those found on the Sacramento Valley floor. We believe that by the use of creative, man-made obstacles and possibly some manipulation of the topography, a very fun and challenging course suitable to the needs of a broad disc golfing public can be constructed in a reasonably short time.

Thank you for taking the time to consider these general concerns and suggestions. Thank you also for keeping an open mind when it comes to our inability to suggest a 'compromise' for the proposed location, given the situation at this time.

We sincerely hope you will see that there is no intended malice or ill-will towards the disc golfing community by our desire to retain the vision of Annie K. Bidwell and the management policies of the current Master Management Plan by our advocacy of the same.

Sincerely,

Friends of Bidwell Park Board of Directors

Friends of Bidwell Park
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