

Trail Trekkers: What we are about

Goals

To enhance the quality of life in El Cerrito by improving, building, and publicizing the city's extensive network of trails, public paths and stairs.

To advocate for the preservation and acquisition of open space, to benefit the people in El Cerrito and to preserve habitat and ameliorate climate change.

Benefits of trails and open space are many

-- Ensuring that El Cerrito be a **walkable city**. Trails linking neighborhood together, and linking neighborhoods to the Hillside Natural Area, the Bay and the nearby regional parks, are a major benefit, and have been so defined by the city in such documents as its Urban Greening Plan, which sought to establish paths to provide a **"blue-to-green," Bay-to Hills connection**.

-- Trails are an important form of **emergency egress** in the case of fire, earthquake and the like. Streets in our hills are generally narrow, and many of them are long and run parallel to the crest, which means there are long distances to travel before a person can head downhill.

In many areas, El Cerrito paths exist that would provide a quick way to head downhill to safety. There are areas where two or three legs of trails could be improved to speed up evacuation and publicized as evacuation routes.

The city's paths need to be regarded as **important parts of its transit infrastructure**, along with streets and sidewalks.

-- The **Hillside Natural Area is the city's biggest parkland**, a defining element in the city, as Golden Gate Park is to San Francisco.

-- Adding protected open space within the city, especially when the land is pristine riparian habitat and oak woodland, would be in line with the state and **federal 30x30 initiative, which is a commitment to "protecting 30% of all land and water by 2030,"** and whose goals are stated as **"slowing the rapid warming of the planet** and mitigating the worst effects of climate change; **preserving biodiversity** and addressing the global extinction crisis; ensuring communities have **access to clean air, water and safe outdoor spaces.**"

Trekkers history

Founded in 2010 as an offshoot of the city's Environmental Quality Committee. Trekkers was made an official city co-sponsored organization. We are a nonprofit under the financial aegis of the El Cerrito Community Foundation.

By working closely with the city, Trekkers has brought **renewed public attention to the city's open spaces and trail network.**

Trail building: The northern section of the Hillside Natural Area (aka “Motorcycle Hill,” a name we gave it), once had a single passable trail, from Potrero to the crest, a short section. Now there are a **weave of trails in this area**, reaching all the way to Snowdon Avenue.

Trekkers built them all, sometimes in partnership with the EC High Mountain Bike Club, Montessori students, and other partners.

Madera Open Space, the central part of the Hillside Natural Area, was essentially impassable when it was privately owned. Now it is **well served with trails**, all built by Trekkers.

Trekkers has **improved several urban paths** and other Hillside trails to make them safer, eliminate blockages, and the like. We have spearheaded native plantings with the Girl Scouts and other volunteers.

Open space: In 2013-2014 Trekkers led a campaign to acquire Madera Open Space, a steep natural area that had been targeted for a community of luxury homes. We worked with the Trust for Public Land on an agreement with the landowner, and pulled in more than half a million dollars to **buy the 7 ½-acre area**, which has a free-flowing creek, riparian habitat, woodland and grassland.

About half of the sum came from a National Park Service Land & Water Grant; about \$100,000 was raised locally by Trail Trekkers. Funds also came from a regional park bond measure. No city general funds were spent on the site.

In addition to acquiring the land, another major accomplishment came out of this: In order to provide the funding, the National Park Service required that the city dedicate in perpetuity the entirety of the Hillside Natural Area to open space use.

Selected accomplishments

Habitat restoration and maintenance. Trekkers sponsors or co-sponsors dozens of habitat events yearly, often with the EQC’s Green Teams, Friends of Five Creeks, scouting and youth groups, and others.

Entire areas of the Hillside that were once covered in French broom are now free of the noxious weed, allowing for native plants to flourish and making it easier for people to access creeks and other areas of natural wonder that were once walled off.

Broom is a major fire danger, so its removal results in greater safety for neighbors.

Trekkers has also worked to identify areas of native plants and worked to preserve them, in some instances in advance of city and contractor fire road work that might have inadvertently damaged this habitat.

We have also worked to remove other invasives, including ivy, Monterey cypress seedlings, and more.

Hikes: Trekkers sponsors more than two dozen hikes every year, in addition to our two-day Hillside Festival. Our leaders, ranging from hobbyists to esteemed academics, include some of the most knowledgeable people in the area. Our events are variously aimed at general audiences, young people, seniors. We occasionally sponsor nature talks as well, at our annual meeting, at the public library, etc.

Map and signage. Trekkers worked with the National Park Service to develop our **trail map** to all city trails, and **way-marking signs** in the Hillside Natural Area. We worked with the **El Cerrito Rotary Club on the Rotary Interpretive Walk** in the Hillside.

What is Trekkers doing now?

Trekkers wants to **return to trail building**. Because of concerns with low city staffing levels and workload, city staff has told us not to build trail at the moment – even though there would be no cost to the city except for minor help, such as removal of debris. We would like the City Council to make trail building part of the city’s work plan.

Some trails could be improved by volunteers while other would require engineering and contractors.

Trekkers wants to work with the city to acquire “Fairview Open Space,” a 15-acre tract just north of the Hillside, to become part of the Hillside Natural Area. We plan to seek a Coastal Conservancy grant to pay for the property, and to seek other outside funding sources. We hope to continue our relationship with Trust for Public Land, which has indicated its willingness to work with us on this project.

Trekkers will soon work on **installation of the trail signs** designed by the National Park Service, in the Hillside Natural Area. We hope to also install trail signs along the urban paths and stairs. Trekkers has offered to pay for the non-Hillside trail signs and to install them ourselves.

Trekkers would also like the city to work with neighboring property owners whose lands abut the Hillside Natural Area to obtain **easements to allow public use of land that many people think is part of the Hillside**, but remains private. The largest of these owners is PG&E.