

MERCED COUNTY UNIVERSITY COMMUNITY PLAN POLICY DISCUSSION PAPER

Area Plan – Recreation

For CPAC Discussion: May 24, 2001 Meeting

I. INTRODUCTION AND SETTING

This report provides a description of

- the nature and extent of active and passive (open space) recreational opportunities available in or near Merced County and adjacent to the sites chosen for the proposed University of California, Merced campus and for the new University Community;
- applicable City of Merced, Merced County and comparison County policies relating to parks, recreation and open space;
- potential issues related to increased use of public recreational facilities including Lake Yosemite Regional Park; and
- recommended policies to address and resolve the challenges associated with potential increased, and possible joint use, of recreational facilities and parklands.

This paper is presented for discussion purposes only. Information used in this analysis was obtained from the County of Merced, City of Merced, Virginia Smith Trust, Merced Irrigation District (MID), Merced County Sheriff, California Department of Fish and Game District 4 (DFG), Merced County Parks and Recreation Division, Merced County Association of Governments (MCAG), State of California Parks and Recreation Department, U.S. Census Bureau, various university and college campuses and collegiate sports associations.

II. EXISTING SETTING

LAKE YOSEMITE REGIONAL PARK

Physical Setting and History

Lake Yosemite is a water-retention facility created by the Merced Irrigation District (MID) in 1887 •that became operational upon completion of the dam in 1888. The Lake provided domestic water for the City of Merced until 1914, and now is used primarily to regulate irrigation water for 63,000 acres of agricultural land, and secondarily for flood control. MID owns the 486-acre Lake and the surrounding shoreline, including portions of the land on the southeast side of the Lake now used for recreation by the County of Merced. Informal recreational use of this portion of the lakeshore was initiated about the same time as the shift

from domestic water supply to irrigation uses. MID formally leased the Lake and its shoreline to Merced County for further development as a regional recreational site beginning in the late 1930s. The current 50-year lease (1976 to 2026) extends the County's recreational use. MID provides no fiscal support for any Park facilities or maintenance. Recreational uses now begin at the Park gates at the Fairfield Canal inlet and Lake Road and extend in a northeasterly direction around the Lake to the terminus of County property.

The County used its General Funds, State Park Bond revenues, and funds from the US Department of Interior's Land and Water Conservation Fund (LWCF) program to purchase parkland in two increments. The first 55.1 acres was purchased for \$48,600, or approximately \$800 per acre, and recorded on June 26, 1920. Another 205.1 acres was purchased for \$186,500, or approximately \$900 per acre, and recorded on April 10, 1975. No portions of the Park property were donated. Of these 260 acres, 230 are currently leased for grazing, and the remaining acres are in the developed portion of the Park. Of special note is the County's past experience in changing the use of land purchased with federal LWCF funds. Congressional action was required to shift a County-owned parcel from recreational to educational use.

The largest developed portion of the Park is contained in the area between the Fairfield and the Le Grand Canals called Bicentennial Grove. Approximately 30 acres of parkland are located in the Grove, with the remaining approximately 70 acres in turf and buildings. County property extends past Scout Island and the covered picnic areas with a shoreline strip about 500 feet in width, to the north end of the Lake. Near the northeast end of the Lake, about 400 feet from the water, is the site (approximately 30 by 100 feet) of a former County waste disposal site, now abandoned and covered.¹

Water enters from the main inlet canal at the western edge of the Lake just above the MID dam, where Old Lake Road ends. Water exits through the Le Grand and Fairfield Canals to the southeast. The Fairfield Canal then flows in a southeasterly direction through the Merced Hills Golf Course to Rascal and Bear Creeks, while the Le Grand Canal flows toward Planada, Le Grand and other farming communities. At the point where the canals are closest together at the northeastern edge of the Merced Hills Golf Course, there is a 22-foot elevation drop. This drop is sufficient to fuel a 900-kilowatt electrical facility whose power output is currently sold by MID to the Pacific Gas & Electric Company.²

MID is operated under the State Water Code as a subdivision of the State of California. The Lake Yosemite Dam is regulated by the state's Department of Safety of Dams (DSOD). This special district comprises 154,000 acres, including the City of Merced. Five elected board members represent five voting areas with both urban and agricultural residents. The outlet gates to the Fairfield and Le Grand canals remain open from November 1st to March 1st. The Park remains open during this period, but the Lake retains slightly less than half its total water capacity, or approximately 3,000 acre-feet of "dead" storage. Water from winter rains enters

¹ Personal communication, George Rodrigues, Merced County Parks and Recreation, April 27, 2001.

² Personal communication, Ted Selb, Merced Irrigation District, April 18, 2001, and www.mid.org, accessed on April 22 and 23, 2001.

the Lake via the Main Canal from local runoff. During the irrigation season from March to October, the Lake can rise and fall as much as three feet, fluctuating dramatically during the summer months.³

Facility Description

Lake Yosemite Park provides a variety of passive and active recreational facilities and equipment. It is open from April to September, from 7:30 a.m. until 11:00 p.m., and during daylight hours in the winter months. Park gates are locked at night. Vehicle parking is \$4 per day, or through purchase of a \$30.00 season pass. The Park has 2,500 to 3,000 paved and unpaved spaces, including spaces marked for vehicles with trailers. The vehicle charge is in effect every weekend and most weekdays from Easter Sunday through mid October. Use of alcohol is allowed in the Park.⁴

Park facilities and services:

- § Two boat launching ramps
- § Sixty sailboat slips
- § Mooring slips for powerboats (day use only)
- § Boat rental concession for non-powered boats (paddle, sail, windsurfing)
- § Main Beach and Bedesen Beach swim areas
- § Walking pier surrounding Main Beach
- § Food concession and first aid buildings, six restrooms and four domestic water wells
- § Bicentennial Grove with two recreational baseball fields
- § Paved parking throughout the Park
- § Picnic tables and barbecue pits throughout the Park
- § Rental facilities including the Fish and Game Building, an enclosed structure with barbeque, Scout Island with overnight camping for youth groups, and three picnic shelters with barbecues; Rotary Cove I and II; and Veterans' Cove.

³ Personal communication, Ted Selb, Merced Irrigation District, April 18 and April 23, 2001, and www.mercedid.org, accessed on April 23, 2001.

⁴ Personal communication, George Rodrigues, Merced County Parks and Recreation, March 15, 2001.

- § Park caretaker's residence, and shop and maintenance yard. The caretaker's residence is occupied full time.
- § Fishing from the lakeshore or from the MID-maintained dam. The California Department of Fish and Game stocks the Lake 16 times per year with ½ pound, 11 inch (average size and weight) rainbow trout for a total of 18,000 pounds of fish.⁵ Wardens check for fishing licenses primarily during the summer months. Fishing from the MID dam is not included in the district's recreational lease with the County, but the use is tolerated. A paved access road used to maintain the structure crosses the entire length of the dam.
- § Three playgrounds with installed equipment including swings, slides, merry-go-rounds
- § Volleyball courts at two of the three rental picnic sites
- § Bicycling on paved trail

There are no publicly supported swimming lessons, or water safety classes offered. Powerboats are allowed in defined areas, as are water skiing and jet-ski use. Concern about the possible presence of MBTE, the gasoline additive, led to a County Environmental Health Department water quality sampling that revealed "trace" amounts of the additive following a Labor Day weekend. During other times, the additive has not been detectable. Lake water circulates constantly as the inlet and outlet canals provide water to the Lake at all times. There are currently no maximum engine size or noise restrictions on boat motors or jet skis. There have been no water related fatalities in the last five years.⁶

The North Lake Road bikeway begins at Yosemite Avenue and travels north on Lake Road, ending at the Park and Bicentennial Grove. The City of Merced has approximately 14 miles of Class I, road-separated, bikeways that run along local creeks, ending at McKee Road. The City of Merced plans to extend this bikeway, which currently ends just east of Rahilly Park, to the North Lake Road bikeway to provide a direct connection from the City to Lake Yosemite Park. The North Lake Road bikeway is maintained by the County's Road Division.

The Le Grand Canal initially stretched from the Main Canal inlet at Old Lake Road to the current Le Grand Canal outlet, encircling the Lake. After the Lake was filled in 1888, the embankment of the abandoned canal became an informal walking path. Portions of the embankment have since washed away and, although MID does not maintain the path, continued public use of the pathway is tolerated as a recreational activity consistent with the MID lease.

Also included in the MID lease to the County is a small parcel of land at the juncture of Old Lake Road and the Main Canal that is primarily used for fishing access. The County formerly

⁵ Personal communication, Jim Groh, manager, Moccasin Creek Fish Hatchery, Dept. of Fish and Game, April 23, 2001.

⁶ Personal communication, George Rodrigues, Merced County Parks and Recreation, March 15, 2001.

maintained the site, but it is no longer considered part of the Park. The restrooms have been abandoned due to failure of the onsite wells, and temporary toilets are now provided under contract to a private firm.

Funding Sources

All park and recreation facilities at Lake Yosemite Park are managed and maintained by the County of Merced, except the old Merced Irrigation District (MID) ditch tender's residence now leased to the Lake Yosemite Sailing Association. The County operates a reservation center for the Fish and Game Building, the three covered picnic areas that include Veteran's Cove, Rotary Cove I and II, and Scout Island.

- § The Fish and Game Building is an enclosed 2,000 sq. ft. structure with a kitchen, restrooms, nightlights, and fireplace, and outside barbeque. It holds approximately 315 people standing, and 160 seated. It is booked for approximately 95 percent of weekends throughout the year.
- § Scout Island is used for youth group camping excursions. It has one large barbecue pit and two small barbecues, and restrooms. It is booked for 100 percent of weekends from May to September.

Fee picnic areas that are rented between March and October include:

- § Veteran's Cove, which has seating for 144, kitchen facilities, nightlights, two barbecue facilities, one volleyball court and two horseshoe pits and restroom;
- § Rotary Cove I, which has seating for 140 people, kitchen facilities, nightlights, a wood burning fireplace, barbecue, restrooms, one volleyball court and two horseshoe pits; and
- § Rotary Cove II, which seats 88 people, and has kitchen facilities, barbecue, restrooms, and nightlights.

These facilities are reserved for 100 percent of weekends during peak season.

- A boat launch ramp is provided for a fee of \$4.00 per day, or through purchase of a \$20.00 season pass. Mooring and storage fee is \$50.00 per year per boat.

As noted above, revenues devoted to the support of the Park are derived from variety of sources. County Ordinance #1573 sets the fees and charges for use of the facilities, and for vehicle entrance and parking. It also outlines the reservation procedure for the use of Park rental facilities.

To develop and maintain the site, the County relies upon a combination of vehicle, site use, and boat launch and equipment rental fees, in addition to County General Funds. Fees support approximately 30 percent of the total cost. Other agencies contribute in-kind support

to the Park including the Merced County Sheriff's office and the California Department of Fish and Game.

According to County records, the following revenues were collected:

Year	1999	2000
Facility Rental	\$45,928	\$44,578
Vehicle Entrance Fees	\$105,018	\$111,640
Boat Launching Permits	\$9,340	\$10,000
Concessions (Boat/Food)	\$3,115	\$3,316
Total	\$163,401	\$169,534
<i>(Individuals attending functions at the rented facilities are exempt from the Vehicle Entrance Fee.)</i>		

Park User Demographics

Between April and September, the Park serves approximately 300,000 users. In holiday periods including Easter Sunday, Memorial Day, 4th of July, Labor Day, and weekends when the afternoon temperature reaches 100 degrees or above, Park attendance can total eight to ten thousand users per day.⁷ At such times, officials must close the Park when no parking space remains.

While no Park-specific demographic data are available, County staff conducted informal surveys at the toll station, asking drivers about location of residence. Surveys indicate that approximately 85 percent of Park users say they reside in the Merced and Atwater areas. Individuals or groups who rent facilities and equipment, and/or are involved in boating activities are estimated to be those in middle or higher income ranges. The preponderance of those using the two swimming areas and the individual picnic areas are estimated to be from lower-income families. Many of those using the general recreation, non-rental areas of the Park are observed to be Asian, Hispanic and African American. City of Merced Parks and Recreation staff and Merced County Planning staff also observed that the demographic description of these use patterns has remained much the same for several decades.⁸

Regional Demography

A review of recent U.S. Census data may help illustrate the importance of Yosemite Lake Regional Park to specific local population groups. According to the Merced County

⁷ George Rodrigues, Director, Merced County Parks and Recreation, personal communication, March 15, 2001.

⁸ Ibid, March 15, 2001; personal communication, Craig Smith, Assistant City Manager, City of Merced, and former Director, City of Merced Parks and Recreation, March 16, 2001.

Association of Governments and the U.S. Census Bureau,⁹ the population of the County of Merced in 2000 was 210,554, an increase of 18 percent or 32,151 people, over 1990. Over 95,000 people, or 45 percent of the 2000 County population is identified as “Hispanic or Latino of any race,” an increase of 13 percent over 1990. Census data for 2000 indicate that 32.4 percent of all Californians including 43 percent of those under 18, are now identified as Hispanic or Latino of any race.

Approximately 28.5 percent of the County population or 60,000 people, currently receive income assistance from County, state and/or federal government programs. The County distributes approximately \$160 million in funds annually from MediCal (\$90 million in medical care costs), Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (\$44 million) and food stamps (\$25 million). Of those receiving assistance, approximately 53 percent live in the City and 47 percent in the County of Merced.¹⁰

Security and Law Enforcement

The Merced County Sheriff’s Department is responsible for law enforcement in the Park and on Lake Yosemite. From the week before Memorial Day to the week after Labor Day, six School Resource Officers are assigned to the Park and the Lake on a rotating basis, with at least three officers present on Friday, Saturday, Sunday and Monday between 10 a.m. and 10 p.m. Two officers patrol the shoreline and other parts of the Park, while the third officer patrols the Lake itself. There is currently no lifeguard service at the beach and Sheriff’s patrol is currently equipped for water rescue. During the off-season from September to May, a Sheriff’s deputy patrols the Park as part of a normal assignment. More patrol coverage is provided for special, or evening, events year round. Park entry gates are closed to vehicles during off hours.

Situations demanding attention from Sheriff’s deputies usually involve the following activities:

- Traffic tie-ups occur on days when the Park is most heavily used, as cars line up outside the Park on Lake Road waiting for access to the single tollbooth.
- Speeds can exceed the posted limit on Bellevue on those days when the Park is experiencing heavy use.
- Park users are ticketed for leaving cars in marked zones within the Park.
- Drivers of motorized “Wave Runners” have caused conflicts with sailboats or other non-motorized craft. This year there will be a designated area of the Lake for such watercraft to minimize such conflicts.

⁹ American Fact Finder, www.factfinder.census.gov accessed April 22, 2001.

¹⁰ Scott Pettygrove, Deputy Director, Eligibility Services, Merced County Human Services, May 10, 2001, personal communication.

- Altercations between individuals do occur in the Park, and are often associated with use of alcohol.

The Park was described as a “small city” on its busiest summer weekend days.¹¹

Other Merced County Regional Parks

§ Henderson Park, approximately 15 miles north of the project site near the town of Snelling, encompasses approximately 35 developed acres, provides passive recreational uses such as fishing and picnicking, as well as softball fields. Available by reservation for group use is an 800-square-foot clubhouse with a 4,725 square foot outdoor concrete slab, picnic shelter and Grove area.

§ Hagaman Park, located south of Hilmar on the Merced River, is a 16-acre park that provides picnicking and fishing. A picnic shelter is available by reservation for use by groups.

Both parks have a \$2 per car parking fee.¹²

State of California Parks and Recreation Sites in Merced County

The State of California, Departments of Parks and Recreation and Fish and Game operate a variety of public recreation sites located in whole or in part in Merced County. Information about the parks can be found at www.ceres.ca.gov/ceres/calweb/parks.phtml.

California State Parks and Recreation/Fish and Game Sites	Acres
Cottonwood Creek Upper and Lower (DFG) O'Neill Wildlife Area	6,700
George Hatfield State Recreation Area (DPR)	46
Great Valley Grasslands State Park (DPR)	700
Los Banos Wildlife Area (DFG)	6,130
McConnell State Recreation Area (DPR)	78
Mendota Wildlife Area (DFG)	11,802
North Grasslands Wildlife Area (DFG)	6,335
San Luis Reservoir State Recreation Area (DPR) Los Banos Creek Reservoir	28,000
Pacheco State Park	2,600

¹¹ Henry “Hank” Strength, Deputy Sheriff, Merced County Sheriff’s Department, personal communication, May 10, 2001.

¹² George Rodrigues, Merced County Parks and Recreation Division, personal communication, May 10, 2001.

California State Parks and Recreation/Fish and Game Sites	Acres
Volta Wildlife Area (DFG) ¹³	3,004
West Hilmar Wildlife Area (DFG)	340
Total Acres	65,735
California Department of Fish and Game (DFG)	
California Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR)	

Regional state parks include:

§ George J. Hatfield State Recreation Area

Located in near Hilmar in the San Joaquin Valley, and surrounded by the Merced River, the Park has many trees and is home to wildlife, especially birds. Swimming, fishing and picnicking are popular activities.

§ Great Valley Grasslands State Park

Operated in conjunction with McConnell State Recreation Area, the Park has 2,700 acres of grasslands and provides opportunities for fishing along the San Joaquin River as well as field trips for students and field research. The acreage was formerly part of the Freitas Ranch and incorporated parts of Fremont Ford Park. There are no facilities.

§ Los Banos Creek Reservoir

Los Banos Creek Reservoir is known in the area for its excellent fishing. The Department of Fish and Game stocks the reservoir with trout. Bass fishing competitions are often held here, and crappie and bluegill are also caught. The reservoir is located just west of Hwy. 99, south of Volta. The Park has 20 undeveloped camping/picnicking sites located along the shore, with shade, table and stove.

§ McConnell State Recreation Area

The Park is located on the banks of the Merced River. Fishing for catfish, black bass and perch is popular. The Park has 70 acres of picnic, camping and play areas. It is located southeast of Delhi on Hwy. 99, south of Turlock.

• Pacheco State Park

¹³ Merced County General Plan Year 2000, pages VI-24a and 24b; Greg Kauffman, California State Department of Parks and Recreation, McConnell State Park, April 23, 2001, personal communication; www.parks.ca.gov accessed April 16, 2001; Loni Hext, California Department of Fish and Game, April 23, 2001, personal communication; www.dfg.ca.gov accessed April 23, 2001.

Located west of the San Luis Reservoir, the Park is a former ranch, donated to the State Parks system. The Park has 28 miles of designated hiking, mountain biking and riding trails on 2,600 acres currently open to public use. The park is home to tule elk, deer, bobcat, coyote, fox and several varieties of raptors.

§ San Luis Reservoir State Recreation Area

The reservoir is open year round for fishing, boating and camping.¹⁴

Federal Open Space and Recreation Sites in or adjacent to Merced County

Merced National Wildlife Refuge	8,234 acres
San Joaquin River National Wildlife Refuge	12,800 acres
(not currently open to the public)	
San Luis National Wildlife Refuge	26,340 acres

These facilities are open to the public and offer information kiosks, restrooms, marked automobile tour and trail routes, and an overlook tower. The refuges are on the Great Pacific Flyway and offer bird watching.¹⁵ San Luis NWR also has a one of the last remaining herds of tule elk.

Merced Hills Golf Course

The Merced Hills Golf Course is owned by the Virginia Smith Trust. It is a public 18-hole golf course and its revenues are used to fund higher education scholarships for young people living in Merced County. The course is located approximately one-half mile to the south of Lake Yosemite Regional Park. Over 47,000 rounds were played in the most recent year for which records are available, with the number of rounds having increased over 40 percent in the past three seasons.¹⁶ Associated green fees are \$17 on weekdays and \$24 on weekends. Cart rental is \$20 for two players. Tee times can be arranged up to one day before playing.¹⁷ Player programs have been expanded to add clinics for youth players and remedial classes for adults. In addition, the course has participated in several state level “points” events including the Pepsi tour and others that include golfers from throughout the state.

Course management describes the golfer profile as 96 percent white, two percent African American, one percent Asian and one percent other. Approximately 35 percent of those playing are between the ages of 51 and 99, 50 percent are from 21 to 50 years old and 15 percent are 20 or younger. Twenty percent of golfers are estimated to be on “fixed income or retired,” 20 percent in the “upper income” range and 50 percent of “middle income.” School-

¹⁴ California, *Hunting and Other Public Uses on State and Federal Areas*, Department of Fish and Game, State of California, July 2000.

¹⁵ Personal communication, Mary Crist, US Fish and Wildlife Service, Los Banos, April 23, 2001, and www.r1.fws.gov/sanluis accessed April 23, 2001.

¹⁶ Terry Bates, Director, Virginia Smith Trust, personal communication, May 16, 2001.

¹⁷ R. Porter, Manager, Merced Hill Golf Course, personal communication, May 10, 2001.

aged players make up the remainder. Sixty-five percent of players are from the Merced area, 25 percent from Atwater, five percent from other areas of the County and five percent from outside the County. It is estimated that, if the course were to be closed, approximately 40 percent would play in Atwater, ten percent in Madera, 40 percent in Chowchilla, five percent in Santa Nella, and five percent at Stevinson Ranch.¹⁸

Other Public and Private Golf Courses in the Region

Other courses available to the public that are in, or near, the County of Merced include:

- \$ Rancho Del Rey, Atwater public course, 18 holes
- \$ Santa Nella, Los Banos public course, 9 holes
- \$ Stevinson Ranch (near Hilmar) public course, 18 holes,
- \$ Madera Municipal public course, 18 holes
- \$ Pheasant Run, Chowchilla public course, 18 holes

Course	Green Fees			Cart Rentals
	Weekday	Weekend	Holiday	
Merced Hills	\$17	\$24	\$24	\$10/person ¹⁹
Rancho Del Rey, Atwater	\$20	\$25	\$25	\$10/person ²⁰
Forebay, Santa Nella	\$11.50	\$19	\$19	\$18 per cart ²¹
Stevinson Ranch	\$65	\$85	\$85	Fee includes ²²
Madera Municipal	\$19	\$28	\$28	\$12/person ²³
Pheasant Run, Chowchilla	\$25	\$40	\$40	Fee includes ²⁴

There are three private golf clubs in the area including Turlock Golf and Country Club, the nine-hole Executive Course in Hilmar and the Merced Country Club. In addition, Merced County approved the proposed Dry Creek Golf Course (now called Fox Hills) in association with 400 housing units as part of a Community Plan amendment. The development is planned for an area southwest of Los Banos, with the golf course to straddle Interstate 5, but has not been built.²⁵

¹⁸ Terry Bates, Director, Virginia Smith Trust, personal communication, April 27, 2001.
¹⁹ Terry Bates, Director, Virginia Smith Trust, personal communication, April 27, 2001
²⁰ Ibid
²¹ Forebay Golf Course, Santa Nella, personal communication with Christina Davis, May 15, 2001
²² Stevinson Ranch Golf Course, personal communication with Christina Davis, May 15, 2001.
²³ Terry Bates, Director, Virginia Smith Trust, personal communication, April 27, 2001
²⁴ Pheasant Run Golf Course, personal communication with Christina Davis, May 15, 2001.
²⁵ Bill Nicholson, Merced County Planning Department, personal communication, April 25, 2001.

III. APPLICABLE LOCAL POLICIES/PROGRAMS

Merced County General Plan Policies

The 1989 Adopted General Plan recognizes that recreational areas are both a vital component of healthy communities and a regional resource. In rural areas of the County, some 65,000 acres of regional parks, and state and federal park and recreational areas are identified in the Open Space/Conservation chapter. These rural outdoor recreation facilities and areas provide a valuable amenity to County residents and are a regional attraction as well. They are generally compatible with, and are often an important component of, the rural open space resources of the County. In particular, preservation of rivers, lakes and reservoirs are features that add to the quality of scenic corridors as well as the quality of life in the County. There is a need for recreational open space in the countryside outside the urban areas, such as regional parks.

The Land Use, Circulation and Open Space/Conservation Elements of the Merced County General Plan (Year 2000) contain goals, objectives and policies pertaining to recreation and open space uses within Merced County. Policies particularly relevant to the University Community Plan and its relationship to Lake Yosemite Regional Park include those that encourage –

- A system of local and regional parks, and other County recreation areas that balance the relative importance of direct site access with management of sensitive wildlife resources;
- Expansion of existing public recreation land uses including public beaches, parks, recreation areas, wild areas and trails;
- Local and regional park facilities that are adequate to serve the growing County population;
- Sensitive public recreation lands that are buffered from non-recreational land uses through site design and other techniques;
- Use of energy, communication, transmission and distribution easements as equestrian, bicycle and pedestrian or hiking trails;
- Regional parks preserved as areas of natural scenic beauty;
- Consideration of open space recreational uses as appropriate for areas identified as noise impacted;
- Construction of Class I, II or III bicycle routes designated in the overall Merced County Bikeway Plan and in Community Specific Plans;

City of Merced General Plan Policies

The City of Merced *Vision 2015 General Plan* indicates that the purpose and intent of the Open Space-Park/Recreation Facility land use designation is to “provide public and private open space for outdoor recreation both passive and active.” Merced’s standard of five acres of parkland for every thousand residents includes 1.5 acres in community parks and 3.5 acres in neighborhood parks including village greens and school parks. This includes supplementary spaces associated with school and church grounds as well as Lake Yosemite Regional Park. Lake Yosemite is becoming more accessible to Merced residents via a system of bike and walking paths and, in the future, City of Merced and University of California development may surround this Park facility. The plan also comments that “one of the most successful and effective park design concepts has been to build school-parks,” especially in reference to elementary and high school facilities.

Approximately 7.2 percent or 1,400 acres of the total land area within the City of Merced Specific Urban Development Plan Area (SUDP) have been preserved as open space of various kinds. Future development will be directed north and south of existing City onto lands with lesser overall agricultural value.

General Plan policies relevant to Lake Yosemite Regional Park include those that encourage –

- Identification and designation (where appropriate) of additional scenic routes within the City’s expanded SUDP and Sphere of Influence, including consideration of the proposed UC Campus Parkway;
- “Greenway” trails to provide bicycle and pedestrian access throughout the City and its growth areas;
- A link between the City and County bikeway systems by establishing a connector to the Lake Road Bikeway Corridor out to Lake Yosemite;
- Providing equestrian and mountain bike use as part of the overall trail system;
- Cooperation with the County of Merced to evaluate Lake Yosemite Regional Park to identify how it might adequately meet the needs of the City of Merced and the new growth areas in the region including the UC Merced campus.

IV. COMPARISON COUNTY RECREATION POLICIES, CAMPUS RECREATION PROGRAMS, AND CAMPUS RECREATION PROGRAM STANDARDS

Comparison Counties: Recreation and Parks Policies

Recreation policies contained in general plans from the following counties were analyzed for comparison purposes. Fresno, Sacramento, Butte, Yolo, and Sonoma Counties were chosen for their proximity to Merced County, for their relatively comparable population, or for their

unique open space and water recreation resources. All these counties have public colleges and universities within their boundaries.

The policies and programs described below address regional park planning and open space, campus recreation programs shared with local communities and campus recreation standards that may be relevant to the issues addressed later in this paper.

Fresno

Fresno County has a wide variety of recreational resources, including regional parks, state and national parks, national forests, wilderness areas and other recreational resources. The *General Plan* treatment of Open Space and Conservation as well as Recreation, Historical, and Archeological Resources provides broad and articulate policies to encourage further development of public and private recreational lands.

The County –

- maintains a standard of five to eight acres of County-owned or improved parkland per 1,000 residents;
- requires land dedication or fees to meet actual cost of park land acquisition and development related to new residential development and considers special assessment districts when seeking funding for other parkland or historic property acquisitions;
- will develop a countywide Recreational Trail Master Plan;
- encourages park development near schools, community halls, libraries and similar public facilities and encourages joint-use agreements whenever possible;
- encourages other governmental agencies to maintain and improve their respective recreation properties;
- encourages development of private recreation facilities to reduce demands upon public agencies;
- urges joint use agreements with school districts for public facilities located near schools;
- supports special policies designed to protect the San Joaquin River as an aquatic, recreational and water resource; and
- requires development to help fund additional parks and recreation facilities.

Sacramento

The 1992 Sacramento County *General Plan Open Space Element* includes major park and recreation program implementation strategies as part of a comprehensive open space preservation effort. Major implementation strategies include –

- land acquisition,
- park dedication requirements,
- dedication of development rights as a condition of entitlements,
- use of CEQA mitigation measures,
- creating mitigation banks to protect existing resources such as vernal pools,
- purchase of development rights with public funds or private trusts,
- limiting the extension of urban services.

County regional park sites are generally larger than 75 acres, contain facilities or resources not usually found in local community or neighborhood parks and are of sufficient interest that people will travel up to 60 minutes to visit them. A regional park may be a single site, or part of a parkway, with several sites connected by a trail system. The sites may contain unique or limited resources that must be protected or shared among the population.

The County Parks *Master Plan* establishes a minimum standard of 20 acres of regional parkland for each 1,000 persons, *in addition to* any neighborhood and community parkland provided for local use, of which at least 12 will be provided by County Recreation and Parks. That 12 acre minimum is divided between five acres for active use areas and seven for conserved open space.

Butte

Butte County views its primary parks and recreation program responsibility to be the conservation of large natural open spaces suited for park and recreation development and the encouragement of recreation districts to develop facilities for use by all County residents and visitors. Tourism is important to the County economy as Lake Oroville and other large open space and recreation facilities attract campers, fishermen and boating enthusiasts. State, federal and private (PG&E Company) facilities contribute significantly to the County's total recreational resources.

Butte County adopted a regional parks standard that includes 10-15 acres per thousand people, with a 100-acre minimum for such facilities, that are intended to serve a five-mile radius of population. The plan delineates both active and passive recreation activities, recommends specific recreation development areas within the County and the activities to be associated with each, and names the responsible agency. Because of the unique nature of the County's natural resources, cities, state and federal agencies, and state-regulated utilities such as Pacific Gas and Electric Company may all bear some responsibility for development and maintenance of regional parks.

Yolo

Yolo County acquires and maintains a variety of parks and open spaces through land use controls, regulations, real property transfer and cooperation with other jurisdictions. The County's responsibility is limited by policy to providing direct development, operation and maintenance of regional parks and recreation areas.

The County –

- establishes and maintains open space corridors through existing and future urban development using drainage ways, streams and riverfront to integrate an open space corridor plan and makes conformance mandatory for all new development;
- locates schools in or near open space areas and links them to residential areas through open space corridors;
- integrates recreation, bikeways, trails and other public areas with open space plans and makes conformance with such plans mandatory for all new development;
- cooperates with special districts, cities, and state and federal agencies to acquire, develop and manage recreation facilities, resources and programs for joint use;
- promotes locating schools and recreation areas on adjoining sites wherever possible; and
- advocates the adoption of plans for regulating public recreational use of any urban waterfront areas including streams, lakes and reservoirs to assure access for all residents.

Sonoma

Sonoma County's *2000 Outdoor Recreation Plan* promotes interagency cooperation to

- provide public access and recreation opportunities on public lands,
- recommend future alternative funding mechanisms,
- improve the ability of regional park providers to compete successfully for limited funding,
- establish an achievable ratio of public outdoor recreational acreage to population,
- define public agency roles in providing youth services.

The County General Plan has a standard of 20-acres per one thousand residents for regional recreational and open space park needs. Five of those acres are for active regional park facilities, and 15 acres for passive open space.

The new Outdoor Recreation Plan –

- adds additional parks near urban locations to provide organized sports and as well as trail opportunities,
- encourages partnerships with schools and cities to develop joint park/school sites in unincorporated areas of the County, and
- identifies a process for acquiring park properties.

Comparison Higher Education Recreation Programs and Standards

Campuses of the University of California and the California State University systems conduct a variety of recreation programs that are shared with the local community. Those outlined below share an emphasis on water-related activities, use of recreational facilities for campus academic programs as well as for recreation, and use of the facilities and programs by members of the community. While these programs are structured and financed in much the same way, they reflect the natural environment unique to the campus location and the needs of the community.

In addition, standards for recreation facilities used by the California State University system are described below as well as those limited recreation standards offered by national collegiate recreation and sports organizations.

California State University – Sacramento

Since 1981, CSUS has operated a water recreation program and boathouse at Lake Natoma on the American River just below Folsom Dam. This \$900,000 a year program is funded primarily from a student fee subsidy, with less than one percent from public funds. Approximately 8,000 students and members of the public take courses each year, rent equipment and participate in competitive water sports events such as “Masters Rowing” that draw large crowds. The CSUS program has a continuing lease for the site from the California State Park “Goldrush District.” Courses for academic credit are offered to CSUS students through departments such as recreation, and physical education. The aquatic center’s board includes representatives from State Parks, campus administration, campus academic departments, the CSU Associated Students, the University Union (a separate organization that operates the Union), and the community. Summer youth courses are also offered. Costs are covered by class, event and rental fees.

In addition, on its main campus CSUS has unguarded and unfenced tennis courts and baseball and soccer fields available to the public whenever no campus events are taking place. In addition, community groups can reserve other campus recreation and physical education facilities.²⁶

²⁶ Ron Richardson, Director, Facilities Planning, California State University, Sacramento, personal communication, April 15, 2001.

San Diego State University/UC San Diego

At Santa Clara Point in San Diego's Mission Bay, San Diego State University and UC San Diego jointly support and operate the 20-year-old Mission Bay Aquatic Center. The Center's lease is with the city for use of the ½-acre parking lot. For-credit classes are available through campus registration, and the rental program is open to all those related to SDSU including students, faculty, staff and alumni. Approximately 13,000 people take advantage of the classes and events each year. The center has an approximately \$1 million dollar annual budget, of which about 10 percent is subsidized by the campuses involved, in proportion to their respective participation • 70 percent from SDSU student activity fees and UCSD student registration fees. Many academic departments use the facility including recreation, physical education and fitness programs.

San Francisco State University

San Francisco State University is currently planning a water-related academic program and boathouse on San Francisco's Lake Merced, in the heart of San Francisco and adjacent to the campus, in cooperation with the City. The lake has been neglected as a public recreation site and the campus seeks to refocus public attention and resources on this valuable city open space. The initial planning focused on an existing City needs study, and added those services and activities that the campus could contribute. The 50-person Lake Merced Task Force, a community/campus advisory board, is reaching agreement on those recreation, natural resource research, and water-related activities that could be provided for the campus, the community, research and program professionals and various combinations of those groups. The goal is a public service program run by the campus that supports rowers, outdoor, after school and summer nature preservation programs for the community, and activities designed specifically for seniors, among others.

After agreement has been reached on program elements, actual planning will begin on the cooperative agreement between the City and the campus. The plan tentatively includes building a new aquatic center and boathouse that will also serve as a community center, and involving physical education, recreation, health and human services and environmental studies programs as sponsoring academic departments. The courses, academic programs and rental equipment will be based upon the Sacramento State model and will be funded primarily with student fee revenue.

In addition, SFSU is currently discussing a similar cooperative program with the East Bay Regional Park District for the Miller-Knox Regional Park. There is a tentative proposal to develop a waterfront park for public and campus aquatic recreational uses.²⁷

Other examples of cooperative campus/community programs and structures by the campuses of the California State University include:

²⁷ Don Zingali, Dean, College of Health and Human Services, San Francisco State University, personal communication, April 23, 2001

- A. an agreement between Cal State Fullerton and the redevelopment agency of the City of Fullerton to operate the arboretum for community and campus use,
- B. a joint operating agreement between the City of Fullerton and Cal State Fullerton for city use of campus sports fields and facilities,
- C. a community/campus library, located on the grounds of San Jose State University that is jointly funded by the City of San Jose, and
- D. a City of Los Angeles crime lab located on the campus of Cal State Los Angeles and used jointly by the City and the campus.²⁸

University of California, Santa Barbara

This 19,000 student campus on the shore of the Pacific Ocean, in unincorporated Santa Barbara County, has a unique relationship with the residents of the neighboring communities of Isla Vista, which houses many students, and with the cities of Goleta and Santa Barbara. In association with UCSB's 1989 Long Range Development Plan, the campus pledged resources and support for several long-term community commitments, including recreation.

The campus committed to --

- locate and fund a community center in Isla Vista as part of a joint community effort,
- schedule cultural events in Isla Vista including a film series and lectures,
- support formation of the Isla Vista Recreation and Parks district and the acquisition of park land,
- provide reclaimed water for use on community parks, and
- publish a guide to the use of campus meeting and recreational facilities for the public.²⁹

In addition, UCSB's Department of Physical Activities and Recreation currently maintains agreements with, or supports activities for, community groups that include access to campus facilities and programs. These include the Santa Barbara Swim Club, the Water Polo Club, AYSO Soccer, Surf and Kayak Camp, community classes at the campus sailing facility and a year round Gymnastics School. In addition, members of the community may become members of the Aquatic Center on a year round, or summer only, basis.

UCSB regularly consults with other recreation providers in the community such as the YMCA, the Boys and Girls Clubs and the City of Santa Barbara Recreation Department.³⁰

²⁸ Bill Knight, legal counsel, California State University, Office of the Chancellor, Long Beach, personal communication, May 11, 2001.

²⁹ Tye Simpson, Director of Planning, University of California, Santa Barbara, personal communication, March 21, 2001, and *UCSB Neighborhood Support Measures for the Community of Isla Vista, June 2, 1990*.

University of California, Los Angeles

UCLA requires some affiliation with the campus as student, staff, faculty or alumni to have access to the campus's athletic facilities, or registration for an event or class. UCLA indicates that the standard for outdoor recreation is generally considered to be 85.5 square feet per enrolled student. Because of the urban nature of the campus, UCLA has 14.3 square feet of outdoor recreation space per student, or 33,000 acres instead of the recommended 411 acres.

UCLA also operates an aquatic center on the Pacific Ocean at Marina del Rey. The space is leased to the campus by the County of Los Angeles for a fee, and is operated in cooperation with other higher education institutions in the region. All adult programs are limited to those with a UCLA "affiliation" of some kind. Costs are supported by course fees or by student registration card. The Outdoor Adventures program offers canoe, kayaking, sailing, rowing and windsurfing classes and equipment rentals to students, faculty, alumni/donors, and UCLA guests.

Through agreements and regular cooperation with the City of Los Angeles and a variety of non-profit programs including Boy Scouts, Girl Scouts, YMCA, Boys and Girls Clubs and similar organizations, UCLA offers about one quarter of its youth aquatic programs to "at risk" youth. Some of the non-profit programs contracting with UCLA provide their own funding, and UCLA raises also raises grant funds to provide programs for children and youth from the community. For example, the State of California Department of Boating and Waterways provides equipment for the youth "at risk" program through a grant of \$18,000 annually on average.³¹

Recreation Standards for Higher Education Facilities

California State University System

The California State University's 24 campuses have standards for campus physical development, including indoor and outdoor physical education and recreation facilities. The recommended square footage amounts are tied to numbers of full-time students or their equivalent in credit hours. For example, the State University Administrative Manual recommends a range from 12 net square feet of indoor physical education facilities for each full-time student for a campus of 2,000 students, to six square feet per full-time student for a campus of 25,000 FTE students. For outdoor facilities, the recommended range begins at 18 acres and four teaching stations for 2,500 students, ending at a high of 39 acres and 19 teaching stations for a campus of 25,000 students. The Manual also addresses specialized outdoor facilities including tennis and handball courts, a running track and swimming pools.³²

³⁰ John Spaventa, Director, Department of Physical Activities and Recreation, University of California, Santa Barbara, May 10, 2001.

³¹ Shea Garvin, UCLA Marine Aquatic Center, personal communication, May 11, 2001.

³² California State University, *State University Administrative Manual* (SUAM), "Physical Planning and Development, Section VI, Standards for Campus Development Programs," June, 1998.

National Intramural-Recreation Sports Association (NIRSA)

NIRSA is a professional organization devoted to supporting and informing those who provide collegiate programs nationwide, in a variety of facilities. Its publications address a wide variety of issues, including the assessment of space standards for indoor facilities. It provides no absolute standards for recreational facilities, but offers its members ways to evaluate the adequacy of their respective programs.³³

National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA)

NCAA has prescribed requirements for dimensions of campus playfields and sport courts for campuses wishing to play in its sports divisions, but no published land use standards exist for collegiate sports facilities generally. NCAA member facilities must sponsor a minimum of 14 sports, offering equal access to both men and women, and most schools offer between 20 and 30 sports. The Association requires that practice and competition for the division within which the institution's teams are playing be done on fields and courts that match strict dimension standards for that division.³⁴

IV. POTENTIAL ISSUES AND POLICY OPTIONS

The ultimate population associated with the proposed University of California, Merced and the University Community could be as many as 50,000 people within the next thirty years. This population increase will affect local and regional parklands and programs, including Lake Yosemite Regional Park. The possibility of such increased use of the Park presents both challenges and opportunities for the Merced area community.

In association with the University Community Plan, policies have been developed and proposed to provide parks, recreation programs and open space sufficient to meet the needs of the new community. The additional policies listed below are presented for discussion and consideration by the County of Merced as part of adopting the University Community Plan as a General Plan Amendment.

Issue A. Conversion of County Property Intended for Park Expansion

In addition to the Merced Hills Golf Course, the University of California plans to acquire County-owned property immediately to the north of the course that is currently planned for the expansion of Lake Yosemite Regional Park. The County's Parks and Recreation Division regards this property as the most appropriate place for Lake Yosemite expansion because it is

³³ National Intramural Recreation and Sports Association, www.nirsa.org/fac2a.htm accessed March 31, 2001.

³⁴ National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA), from *Athletic Recreational Facility Area Analysis*, written for Skidmore, Owings & Merrill by William Manning Associates and Ellerbe Beckett, January 25, 2001.

next to the existing Park, shares similar favorable climatic features and would be less costly than either moving the entire expanded Park site elsewhere on the Lake, or acquiring, developing and maintaining two park sites at Lake Yosemite.

Recreation Policy # 1

The County of Merced shall initiate and develop a Lake Yosemite Regional Park Master Plan in cooperation with the City of Merced and the University of California to determine the potential uses, necessary facilities, design standards, and funding strategies for public parkland surrounding Lake Yosemite.

Such a Master Plan will address active and passive recreation including playing fields, recreational equipment design and placement, a pedestrian, bicycle and equestrian recreational trail system around the Lake and connecting to existing or planned trails, parking and landscape planning and design.

Recreation Policy # 2

The County of Merced shall encourage acquisition and development of an additional 200 acres of parkland adjacent to Lake Yosemite to be included within the Lake Yosemite Regional Park. This program shall be accomplished with the cooperation and support of the University of California -- and adjoining property owners where new development may be contemplated in the foreseeable future -- in order to offset the conversion of land currently planned for expansion of Lake Yosemite Regional Park to campus uses, and the increased upward pressure on property values for land adjacent to Lake Yosemite.

Recreation Policy # 3

The County of Merced shall cooperate with the University of California to develop appropriate mechanisms for acquiring park property to replace that lost to conversion to campus uses. Options could include the University purchasing from the County the designated acreage to the north of the Merced Hills Golf Course, the University itself acquiring appropriate replacement property around Lake Yosemite for an extension of the existing Park, or development of a fee mechanism to which the University would contribute with the responsibility for acquiring a suitable park expansion site being held by the County of Merced, or other appropriate mechanism to be determined by the County and the University.

§ Conversion of the Merced Hills Golf Course to UC Merced campus

There are nearly 50,000 rounds of golf played each year on the Merced Hill Golf Course. Conversion of course to a college campus will result in the loss of that community recreation resource as the site is developed, reducing recreational activities for a defined segment of the local population.

Recreation Policy #4

The County of Merced shall encourage development of a public golf course within, or in the vicinity of, the University Community Plan Specific Urban Development Plan (SUDP), as warranted by demand for such facilities.

Recreation Policy #5

The County of Merced shall strongly encourage the University of California, Merced to maintain the use of Merced Hills Golf Course for as long as possible in planning and siting campus buildings.

Issue B. Compatibility of Lake Yosemite Regional Park with University of California and the University Community

§ Change in Park User Demographics

Providing recreational opportunities for college students and for families in the Merced Community involve functionally different activities, and conflicts could occur if they were provided in the same park setting.

Recreation Policy # 6

The County recommends that the University of California, Merced, provide shared use of its on-campus recreational, parking and sports facilities with the Merced community. Such cooperative programming may diminish impacts on the existing Park by providing additional recreational opportunities to Park users.

Recreation Policy # 7

The County of Merced and the University of California will cooperate to initiate and maintain a cooperative campus-run, water-related program on Lake Yosemite that combines academic programs with student and public recreational water sports activities year round.

Recreation Policy #8

The University of California will be encouraged to provide its student/staff/faculty with active recreational and sports facilities and programs on campus that meet or exceed any recommended standards for the anticipated campus population, concurrent with increases in campus population.

§ Changes in Park atmosphere and “feel”

Visual, noise and traffic and circulation impacts will occur, and Park patrons will eventually feel “enclosed” by the intense urbanization of both the adjacent campus land, and the University Community. Views from the Park to the south and east that were formerly open rangeland will be eliminated, for example, changing the experience of the Park to that of an urban

environment. Depending upon how close campus buildings are to its boundary, the Park will “feel” much smaller and less like a recreational open space to its patrons.

Recreation Policy # 9

The County of Merced shall encourage the University of California, Merced to designate land currently designated for Park expansion as an appropriate buffer for Lake Yosemite Regional Park, including lower intensity on-campus uses such as athletic fields, surface parking lots, or agricultural/botanical research to minimize the noise and visual impacts described above.

§ Potential for increased Park fees

Assuming the Park is subject to increased future use due in part to the UC Merced campus and University Community population increase, increased fees may be needed to support land acquisition, development and maintenance of additional facilities and equipment. Increased fees could result in reduced use of the Park by current users who may be unable to pay them.

Recreation Policy #10

The County of Merced shall monitor use of Lake Yosemite Regional Park associated with increased population and assess those impacts related to build out of the University of California, Merced. The County shall work cooperatively with the University to offset increased costs to the County for Park development and maintenance through a campus contribution commensurate with increased Park use by the campus community. Such support could enhance the Park for all users, maintain gate fees at current levels, and maintain support for County park operations at the current thirty percent of cost.

§ Potential for Decrease in Water Quality and Increased Noise

The County of Merced shall assess increased use of the Lake that could result in increased fuel-powered watercraft contributing to MBTE contamination in the Lake, and watercraft noise.

Recreation Policy #11

The County of Merced shall limit the nature and number of fuel-powered watercraft on the Lake at any one time and/or designate areas of the Lake for the use of such craft.

Issue C. Increased Demand for Recreation and Open Space Facilities

The population associated with the University of California and the University Community is in excess of that currently planned for by the County of Merced and may equal as many as 50,000 additional residents in the next thirty years. The current County standard for provision of parks is 2.5 acres per 1,000 people in new, single family residential developments, which can be met for the University Community through parkland dedication or fees from new single-family residential development. However, federal standards for all community parklands are five acres per 1,000 persons, of which two are designated for regional parks and open space.

Under such a standard, the increased campus and University Community population generates affects the provision of parkland countywide.

Recreation Policy #12

The County of Merced and the University of California, Merced shall create a joint task force to meet regularly in a public setting to achieve cooperative goals for recreation and open space planning, parkland and resource acquisition, and the provision of adequate active and passive recreation, parks and open spaces to meet the needs of the eastern Merced County and University of California-related population.

Merced County University Community Plan

Regional Recreation Report Contacts and Resources:

Personal Contacts:

Bates, Terry
County Office of Education
Merced Hills Golf Course
209.381.6600 ext. 6855
209.381.6778 fax

Brandenburg, Greg
Mission Bay Aquatic Center
San Diego State/UC San Diego
San Diego
858-488-9325
glen.brandenburg@sdsu.edu
www.mbac.nu

California Department of Fish and Game
Fresno District Office
Merced River Fish Facility
559-243-4005
209-563-6410

Cooke, Monica (bikeways expert)
Merced County Association of Gov'ts
209-723-3153
re: Merced County Bike Lane Master Plan

de Simone, Bill
Former Merced Assistant School Supt.
(development team for Merced Hill GC)

Golf Digest
www.golfdigest.org
Research office, NYC
Igilo, Joanne, 213-789-3072
Patterson, Marissa
213-789-3070
Lis Specht, Director, Research
213-789-3076

Gray, Gordon Public Works
(Parks Facilities)
City of Merced
Merced, CA
209-385-6800 or 6806

Gutierrez, Natalia
Merced County Association of
Governments
209.723.3153
209.723.0322 fax

Kauffman, Greg
California Department of Parks and
Recreation
McConnell State Recreation Area
209-394-7755

Lesch, Jack, Planning Director
John Hofmann
Planning Department
City of Merced
209.385.6860

Moccasin Creek Fish Hatchery
209-989-2312 (Jim Groh)
Los Banos Wildlife Area
209-826-0463 (Loni Hext)
Fresno Office
559-222-3761

National Golf Foundation
www.ngf.org
Florida
Darrin Davis
561-744-6006 x 54

Nicholson, Bill, Director
Planning and Community Dev
County of Merced
2222 M Street
Merced 95340
209.385.7654
726.1710 fax
PL07@co.merced.ca.us

Perez, Craig, Director
CSU, Sacramento
Aquatic Center, Lake Natoma
985-7239
278-4912
>csusaquaticcenter.com

Pesner, Lee
Housing, Recreation, Code Enforcement
City of Merced
209.385.6855

Meneley, Jak
Director, Organized Sports
209-385-6894
City of Merced

Pettygrove, Scott
Deputy Director, Eligibility Services
Human Services Agency
County of Merced
2115 Wardrobe Avenue
Merced, CA 95340
209-385-3000

Rodrigues, George
County of Merced
Parks and Recreation Division
Public Works
2222 "M" Street
Merced 95340
209-385-7426
209-385-7428 fax

Smith, Craig
Assistant City Manager
(Former Parks and Rec Director)
678 West 18th St.
Merced, CA 95340
209-385-6865
209-723-1780 fax

Francis, Greg, Planner
California State University, Chico
530-898-6235
gfrancis@csuchico.edu

Selb, Ted
Merced Irrigation District
Merced
209-722-5761
209-722-6421 fax

Simpson, Tye
Planner
Budget and Planning
University of California, Santa Barbara
805-893-4244

Spaventa, John
Director, Department of Physical Activities
and Recreation
University of California, Santa Barbara
Santa Barbara, 92101
805-893-3702

Strength, Henry (Hank), Under Sheriff
County of Merced
700 West 22nd Street
Merced 95340
209-385-7556
209-990-2870 pager

Suter, Ron
Director of Parks and Recreation
Sacramento County
916-875-6132

US Fish and Wildlife Service
Los Banos
209-826-3508
Mary Crist

Zak, Ray
UCLA, Intramural Sports
310. 825.3701
310.825.3086 direct
310.825.6321 fax

Zingali, Don
Dean, College of Health and Human
Services
San Francisco State University
415-338-3326/27
415-338-0586 fax

Other Resources:

Butte County
Recreation Element 1971
www.buttecounty.net/dds/recreation
accessed March 13, 2001

City of Merced
Vision 2015 General Plan
April 1997

Fresno County
*Open Space and Conservation Element
and
Recreation, Historical and Archeological
Resources*
General Plan Update, *January 2000*

Fresno County
General Plan Update EIR
Parks and Recreation Section
February 2000

Merced and Atwater Bicycle Plan
Merced County Association of
Governments
November 1999

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General Plan, June 1989

Merced County Association of
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Regional Bicycle Plan
December 1998

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