

NOTICE OF CEQA EXEMPTION

To: ☐ Office of Planning and Research
1400 Tenth Street, Room 121
Sacramento, CA 95814

From: City of Albany
1000 San Pablo Avenue
Albany, CA 94706

X County Clerk
County of Alameda

PROJECT TITLE: Albany Hill Forest Management & Habitat Restoration Plan

PROJECT LOCATION - SPECIFIC: Northern Terminus of Taft Avenue and Jackson Street

PROJECT LOCATION - CITY: Albany

PROJECT LOCATION - COUNTY: Alameda

DESCRIPTION OF NATURE, PURPOSE, AND BENEFICIARIES OF PROJECT:

The park encompasses 15.6 acres, both on city-owned parcels, and over easements granted to the City. The park is surrounded by single-family residences on the north, east and south, and high-rise condominium developments on the west.

Adjacent to the park to the northwest is an additional 11 acres of permanent open space owned and maintained by Bayside Commons Condominiums, Bridgewater Condominiums and Gateview Condominiums. In addition, a single, undeveloped 11-acre parcel owned by the Golden Gate Hill Development Company is located to the southwest. The plan does not propose any actions to take place within privately maintained parcels.

Existing public access to the site is from the ends of Taft, Jackson and Madison Streets and from Pierce Street via a trail at Bayside Commons. In addition, there are numerous unofficial trails that access the site from adjacent parcels and streets. A compacted earth fire access road enters the Albany Hill portion of the park from the north beginning at the end of Taft Street and continues south following the ridge across private land to connect to Hillside, Gateview and Pierce Streets. No private vehicles are allowed in the project area.

The proposed project is the adoption of the Albany Hill Forest Management & Habitat Restoration Plan presented to the City of Albany. The plan focuses on an 11-acre portion of the Park (Figure 1: map of project area).



1. Map of project area

The proposed plan includes three primary elements. The implementation of the plan will be undertaken in phases by contractors selected and managed by the City of Albany.

Element 1 - Monarch Butterfly Protection

The Monarch Protection Element is intended to safeguard trees that are critical to the current Western Monarch Butterfly (*Danaus plexippus*) clustering sites, and to provide for the planting of replacement clustering and windbreak trees to ensure long term habitat support.

The project includes both a “Critical Monarch Zone” (Exhibit A) and a “Monarch Management Zone” (Exhibit B). No trees will be removed from the Critical Monarch Zone. This area will be managed over time by the City of Albany separate from this plan including dead wood removal and mowing of grasslands. Surrounding the Critical Monarch Zone to the north and the west is the Monarch Management Zone. Within the Monarch Management Zone, the strategies in the plan are intended to address the anticipated failure of the current Eucalyptus. The strategies include:

1. Retain existing Eucalyptus in the Monarch clustering areas to provide wind protection until existing trees fail or become imminent hazards;
2. Plant more appropriate species as replacement trees selected from field trial candidates and allow them to gain stature prior to the failure of current host trees; and
3. Plant groundcover nectar sources in open areas adjacent potential cluster sites on City property (native grassland target habitat).

In addition, the plan includes protection of existing and planting additional nectar sources for Monarchs in proximity to clustering sites on Albany Hill.

Element 2 - Native Habitat Enhancement

Native habitat enhancement will occur in the entire project area. Habitat enhancement will include reduction of invasive species, mitigation of ground disturbance and erosion, removal of unstable trees in higher risk areas (except Critical Monarch Zone), and fostering appropriate native plant species. Strategies to achieve these habitats include:

1. Collect seed from existing native plants to generate well adapted restoration material;
2. Conduct surveys prior to tree removals to protect existing native plants;
3. Minimize ground disturbance by using delineated haul routes;
4. Mulch extensively with chipped eucalyptus from removals;
5. Reuse eucalyptus logs to create planting opportunities; and
6. Augment existing stands of native plants.

Element 3 - Wildfire Safety Mitigation

Wildfire safety mitigation measures will occur throughout the project area (except Critical Monarch Zone). Project actions are intended to improve access for firefighting equipment and personnel, and to provide breaks in tree canopy to help prevent fires from progressing into adjacent residential areas. Actions include:

1. Removal of eucalyptus trees on the priority tree list in order to create a fire break between city-owned open space and existing residential land uses on Taft Street and Jackson Street east of the project area; and
2. Selective of hazardous eucalyptus removal along the fire access road on the ridge of Albany Hill and on the eastern slope of Albany Hill.

NAME OF PUBLIC AGENCY APPROVING PROJECT: City Council of the City of Albany

NAME OF PERSON OR AGENCY CARRYING OUT PROJECT: Albany Public Works Dept

EXEMPT STATUS: (*CHECK ONE*)

- ☐ Ministerial (Sec. 21080(b)(1); 15268);
- ☐ Declared Emergency (Sec. 21080(b)(3); 15269(a));
- ☐ Emergency Project (Sec. 21080(b)(4); 15269(b)(c));
- ☒ Categorical Exemption. State type and section number: Guidelines Section 15301 “Existing Facilities” and Guidelines Section 15304 “Minor Alterations to Land”
- ☐ Statutory Exemptions. State code number: CEQA Guidelines Section 15269©

REASONS WHY PROJECT IS EXEMPT:

The proposed plan meets the standards of two separate criteria for California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) categorical exemptions, both as an “Existing Facility” and as a “Minor Alteration to Land.”

This determination is made acknowledging that Albany Hill is recognized as an area containing potentially sensitive biological, cultural and archaeological resources. As a result, the preparation of the plan involved consultation and analysis by qualified biological professionals, outreach to Native American contacts, and incorporation of advanced policies and procedures to assess and protect potential biological, cultural and archaeological resources prior to the initiation of individual phases of the project. In addition, in the event significant resources are found in unexpected areas, the plan requires implementation of best practices to evaluate, preserve and protect the resource.

CEQA Guidelines Section 15301 “Existing Facilities”

The project is categorically exempt from CEQA pursuant to Section 15301 “Existing Facilities” of the CEQA Guidelines, which exempts the maintenance and minor alteration of existing landscaping with negligible expansion of use.

Explanation:

- a. Albany Hill is a local resident-serving open space facility with less than one mile of designated walking trails. The proposed plan does not call for expansion of the park, construction of new structures, changes in city right-of-way, increases in parking, significant ground disturbance such as trenching or grading, or significant alteration of existing public trails on public land. Thus, a negligible expansion of public use is expected.
- b. The removal of trees that are in poor health or hazardous, and planting of native plants in a natural open space park is a routine best practice for public agencies, and is intended to be an environmentally protective activity consistent with long term stewardship of open space.

CEQA Guidelines Section 15304 “Minor Alterations to Land”

The project is categorically exempt from CEQA pursuant to Section 15304 “Minor Alterations to Land” of the CEQA Guidelines, which exempts the minor public alterations in the condition of land, water, and/or vegetation which do not involve removal of healthy, mature, scenic trees, including wildfire fuel management activities.

Explanation:

- a. Until the late 1800s, Albany Hill was composed of native, coastal grasslands, with oak woodlands on the northern side. In the late 1800s, Blue Gum Eucalyptus trees were planted, which have come to dominate the tree canopy in the central and southern portion of the park. Beginning in the fall of 2020, City of Albany Public Works staff noticed a sudden decline in the health of some of the Blue Gum Eucalyptus trees on Albany Hill. City staff observations matched observations of other forestry professionals in other East Bay communities. In May 2021, researchers at UC Berkeley and US Forest Service’s Pacific Southwest Research Station

collected samples from several of the trees that were deteriorating as part of a Bay-Area wide study to determine the cause of the sudden decline of eucalyptus. Results from the research indicate that the trees are stressed and weakened from drought, increasing temperatures, decreasing fog, and latent pathogens taking advantage of the compromised health of the trees (Attachment 1). Blue Gum Eucalyptus are native to moister areas of Tasmania and southern mainland Australia, and are not adapted to the warming and drying climate in California. Therefore, researchers recommended eliminating the trees in drier sites. Furthermore, arborist reports from July 2021 (Attachment 2) and March 2022 (Attachment 3) show that most of the Eucalyptus on city property on Albany Hill are in poor or fair health from internal decay, pathogen attack, and very low soil moisture.

- b. Wildfire safety concerns exist on Albany Hill, with relatively high-density single-family homes located on narrow roadways that are expected to be constrained in a future wildfire evacuation scenario. In the past two years, two different significant fires occurred on Albany Hill. In June 2022, a fire started on the southwest side of the base of Albany Hill, quickly burning 1.4 acres and came within 400 feet of residences (Exhibit C). Due to a rapid response from fire fighters and relatively mild conditions on the day of the incident, the fire was controlled without damaging any structures.

In addition, in September 2024, a small fire started on the southwest side of the base of Albany Hill, burning approximately 5,000 square feet of vegetation (Exhibit D). Similar to the 2022 incident, a rapid response from fire fighters and relatively mild conditions allowed the fire to be controlled without damaging any structures. Several large eucalyptus trees did catch on fire, reaching the crown of the tree. Because of the height of the trees, the trees had to be cut down by emergency responders in order to extinguish the flames.

In December 2022, an analysis of fuels and fire hazards was completed that assessed the fire hazards on Albany and surrounding areas (Attachment 4). The analysis found a high level of hazard, with more than a quarter of the area expected to burn with exceedingly long flame lengths, rapid rate of fire spread, and widespread torching and production of embers.

- c. In March 2023, a significant winter storm struck the San Francisco Bay Area, causing several large trees within the Plan area to become uprooted. In addition, the storm caused significant erosion and numerous small landslides to occur on the uphill sides of Taft Street and Jackson Street. Following the storm, City staff conducted a visual safety inspection of the perimeter of the park. The inspection revealed that because of the erosion and landslides, a number of trees had a significant amount of their root ball exposed, resulting in structural instability (Exhibit E). These trees, if they become uprooted and fall over, would likely fall onto public streets and are large enough to block public roadways, damage overhead utility lines, and strike residences on the opposite side of the street. Due to steep slopes, soil conditions, and the size of the trees, conventional mature tree reinforcement measures are unlikely to be successful.
- d. In 2018, the City commissioned an analysis of the Monarch Butterfly habitat (Attachment 5). The report notes that overwintering monarchs seek sites that rarely freeze, provide protection from wind, and have a varied light environment ranging from full sun to dappled light to deep shade. The analysis found that on Albany Hill, depending on microclimate conditions, butterflies

move between the ridgetop and the southwest slope of Albany Hill. Butterflies were not expected to use the eastern slope for clustering. In 2022, further analysis was prepared (Attachment 6), which provided detailed management recommendations. The report notes that standing dead trees and branches do not provide Monarch habitat, and will eventually fall and potentially damage live trees, and that timely removal after monarch season (October to March) is recommended.

EXHIBITS ATTACHED

Exhibit A – Critical Monarch Protection Zone

Exhibit B – Monarch Management Zone

Exhibit C – 2022 Fire Footprint

Exhibit D – 2024 Fire Footprint

Exhibit E – 2023 Storm Damage

REFERENCE DOCUMENTS ATTACHED (BY LINK)

Attachment 1 - Investigating the Fungi Responsible For The Recent Large-Scale Dieback Of Blue Gum Eucalyptus (*Eucalyptus globulus*) in the San Francisco Bay Area,
<https://www.albanyca.org/home/showpublisheddocument/52451/638028259454100000>

Attachment 2 - Albany Hill Eucalyptus Tree Survey, July 23, 2021
<https://www.albanyca.org/home/showpublisheddocument/52453/638028259461770000>

Attachment 3 - Assessment of Tasmanian blue gum trees, *Eucalyptus globulus* in Albany Hill Park, March 18, 2022
<https://www.albanyca.org/home/showpublisheddocument/52455/638028259472530000>

Attachment 4 - Characterization of Fuels, Fire Hazards, and Recommendations, Albany Hill, Albany, CA, December 13, 2022
<https://www.albanyca.org/home/showpublisheddocument/53673/638179439800970000>

Attachment 5 - Albany Hill Monarch Habitat Assessment, June 2018
<https://www.albanyca.org/home/showpublisheddocument/51314/637901244152400000>

Attachment 6 - Assessment of Drought and Fire Impacts and Fuels Management on Monarch Butterfly Habitat on Albany Hill
<https://www.albanyca.org/home/showpublisheddocument/53671/638179437113270000>

LEAD AGENCY CONTACT PERSON:

Margot Cunningham (510) 524-9543 for project details and Jeff Bond (510) 528-5769 for CEQA exemption.

IF FILED BY APPLICANT:

1. Attach certified document of exemption finding.
2. Has a Notice of Exemption been filed by the public agency approving the project? ☐ Yes ☐ No

Signature:

Date:

City of Albany Community Development Director

- . X Signed by Lead Agency
- . ☐ Signed by Applicant

Date received for filing at OPR:



Mercator Projection

WGS84

UTM Zone 10S



0.1

0.2 km

0.1 mi

Scale **1:2400**

1 inch = 200 feet



MN
13.0°





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WGS84

UTM Zone 10S



0.1

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Mercator Projection
WGS84
UTM Zone 10S
 CALTOPO

0.1 0.2 km
0.1 mi
Scale **1:2400** 1 inch = 200 feet



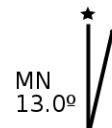
MN
13.0°



2024 Fire Footprint

Mercator Projection
WGS84
UTM Zone 10S
 CALTOPO

0.1 0.2 km
0.1 mi
Scale **1:2400** 1 inch = 200 feet



Photographs – March 22, 2023 – Taft Street, Albany CA



1 Taft Street - Tree Down on Public Street



2 Taft Street - Erosion and exposed root ball



3 Taft Street - Erosion and exposed Root all



4 Taft Street - Erosion