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Enhancing Access to Los Padres National Forest via the Bill Wallace Trail

A Call to Action for Connecting Coastal Communities to Backcountry Resources

1. Executive Summary

For residents of Goleta and neighboring communities, the Los Padres National Forest, a vast and invaluable natural resource, remains largely inaccessible. Decades of limited public trail access have forced residents to undertake lengthy journeys to reach the forest's boundaries. A segment of the Bill Wallace Trail, situated on the eastern side of El Capitán State Park, presents the most direct and promising opportunity to address this deficiency.

The 2002 acquisition of the 2,500-acre El Capitán Ranch presented a transformative vision: a seamless corridor connecting the coastline to the mountains, with the Bill Wallace Trail as its cornerstone. While portions of the trail are currently in use, the absence of a formal connection to the Los Padres National Forest and adequate trailhead infrastructure has prevented the full realization of this vision.

This paper advocates for prioritizing the completion and enhancement of the Bill Wallace Trail through the California State Parks ECRG General Plan Update. This project is a critical regional priority, offering the most viable inland trail connection likely to be completed within the next five years. By establishing this connection, we can:

- Enhance recreational opportunities for local communities.
- Promote environmental stewardship and conservation.
- Improve public health and well-being.
- Provide a vital link to the Los Padres National Forest.

We urge California State Parks to take immediate action by using the ECRG General Plan Update to:

- Open the 30-foot-wide, state-owned access corridor on the eastern side of the inland El Capitán property to create a formal public trail connection.
- Addressing the urgent need for adequate parking facilities to accommodate increased visitation and ensure visitor safety and accessibility.

2. The Challenge: Limited Access to a Vital Resource

The Los Padres National Forest, a sprawling wilderness of immense ecological value and scenic beauty, is a prominent feature of the landscape for residents of Goleta and surrounding areas. However, despite its proximity, direct access to the forest is severely limited. Currently, residents seeking to explore the forest must travel to trailheads above Santa Barbara, the western Gaviota Coast, or via Highway 154, traversing the Santa Ynez Mountains. This lack of convenient access presents several challenges:

- **Reduced Recreational Opportunities:** Limits the ability of local communities to engage in outdoor activities such as hiking, backpacking, and nature observation.
- **Environmental Disconnect:** It hinders residents' opportunities to connect with and appreciate the natural environment, potentially impacting conservation efforts.
- **Increased Travel Burden:** Imposes time and financial costs on individuals seeking to access public lands.

3. The Solution: The Bill Wallace Trail

The Bill Wallace Trail represents a strategic and readily available solution to address the challenge of limited access. This trail segment, located within El Capitán State Park, provides the most direct, geographically efficient route to connect coastal communities with the Los Padres National Forest.

3.1 Historical Context

The acquisition of El Capitán Ranch in 2002 was a pivotal moment in the effort to improve regional public access. This acquisition laid the groundwork for a visionary plan to establish a continuous recreational corridor from the Pacific Ocean to the Santa Ynez Mountains. The Bill Wallace Trail was identified as a crucial component of this plan, serving as the primary link between the coastal plain and the backcountry.

3.2 Regional Significance

The Bill Wallace Trail is recognized as one of the most significant regional foothill trail projects proposed in recent decades. The County of Santa Barbara, local trail organizations, and community advocates have consistently supported its completion. This project has garnered widespread support due to its potential to:

- Create a vital recreational link for the region.

- Promote sustainable tourism and outdoor recreation.
- Enhance the quality of life for local residents.

3.3 Stakeholder Collaboration

Completing the Bill Wallace Trail connection requires collaboration and coordination among several key stakeholders, including:

- California State Parks
- U.S. Forest Service
- Sun Communities (adjacent landowner)
- Santa Barbara County
- Santa Barbara County Trails Council and community groups

4. Recommendations: Prioritizing Action

To fully realize the potential of the Bill Wallace Trail and provide enhanced access to the Los Padres National Forest, we recommend the following actions:

4.1 Formalize the Trail Connection

California State Parks should prioritize the opening of the 30-foot-wide, state-owned access corridor on the eastern side of the inland El Capitán property. This action will establish a formal public trail connection, creating a continuous route from El Capitán State Beach to the Los Padres National Forest via the Bill Wallace Trail. This includes:

- Officially designating the corridor as a public trail.
- Developing and installing appropriate signage.
- Integrating the trail into official park maps and management plans.

4.2 Develop Adequate Trailhead Parking

The completion of the Bill Wallace Trail will inevitably lead to increased visitation. It is crucial to address the need for adequate parking facilities to ensure visitor safety, minimize environmental impact, and promote long-term sustainability. The development of a well-planned parking area should consider:

- Sufficient capacity to accommodate anticipated visitor volume.
- Safe and convenient access for vehicles and pedestrians.
- Design features to minimize environmental impact.
- Accessibility for all visitors.

5. Benefits of Enhancing Access

The completion of the Bill Wallace Trail and the development of adequate trailhead infrastructure will provide numerous benefits to the region, including:

- **Enhanced Recreational Opportunities:** Expanded access to hiking, mountain biking, and other outdoor activities.
- **Promotion of Public Health:** Increased opportunities for exercise and engagement with nature.
- **Environmental Stewardship:** Fostering a greater appreciation for the natural environment and promoting responsible use.
- **Economic Benefits:** Supporting local businesses and attracting visitors to the region.
- **Community Connectivity:** Creating a vital link between coastal communities and the backcountry.
- **Fulfillment of a Regional Vision:** Realizing the long-held goal of a continuous coastal-to-backcountry corridor.

6. Long-term Trail Maintenance

Trail infrastructure requires ongoing maintenance. The Channel Coast District is responsible for maintaining and administering public trails owned or managed by the State of California's Department of Parks and Recreation. Concerns regarding the cost of maintaining new and existing trails in the Gaviota area are addressed through an existing long-term management and maintenance agreement between the State of California's Department of Parks and Recreation and the *Santa Barbara County Trails Council*.

This agreement ensures that trail maintenance in and around Gaviota State Park, Refugio State Beach, and El Capitan State Beach is provided at no cost to the Channel Coast District. All work performed by the *Santa Barbara County Trails Council* adheres to California State Parks Trail Standards, as outlined in the Department of Parks and Recreation Trail Handbook, to maintain amenities and protect habitats adjacent to the trail network. In addition to providing volunteer services, the agreement allows the *Santa Barbara County Trails Council* to provide funds for trail-related amenities and other costs.

7. Conclusion

The Bill Wallace Trail offers a critical opportunity to expand public access to the Los Padres National Forest, a vital natural resource for residents of Goleta and surrounding communities. By prioritizing the formalization of the trail connection and investing in essential trailhead infrastructure, California State Parks can unlock a wide range of benefits, promoting recreation, environmental stewardship, and community well-being. We urge State Parks, through a comprehensive General Plan Update process, to take swift, decisive action to complete this important project and ensure the wonders of the Los Padres National Forest are accessible to all.