

# San Lorenzo Park Redesign

Section 1: Executive Summary  
& Needs Assessment

April 28, 2023



**Prepared for**



Parks and Recreation  
City of Santa Cruz

Parks and Recreation Department  
323 Church St  
Santa Cruz, CA 95060  
831.420.5270

For more information, contact:  
Noah Downing  
[ndowning@santacruzca.gov](mailto:ndowning@santacruzca.gov)

**Prepared by**



Landscape Architecture  
Urban Design  
Planning

PO Box 460309  
San Francisco, CA 94146  
415.206.0648  
[www.bioniclandscape.com](http://www.bioniclandscape.com)



# Table of Contents

4	Section 1 Introduction
6	Executive Summary
16	Needs Assessment



# Section 1

# Introduction

The redesign effort began in December 2022 and will be conducted in three stages. Stage 1 consists of research of existing conditions and observations, and community engagement to inform a needs assessment. The needs assessment, included in this document, identifies the unique opportunities, guiding principles, design goals, and potential programs for the park that will guide the redesign effort. Stage 2 consists of drafting alternatives for the park and developing the concept plan. And Stage 3 consists of developing the final preferred plan and final report documenting the complete redesign process and preferred vision for the park.

The design team conducted Stage 1 from December 2022 through April 2023. Stage 1 is documented in three separate documents:

- Section 1: Executive Summary and Needs Assessment
- Section 2: Existing Conditions Research and Observations & Engagement Process
- Section 3: Appendix

This document, Section 1, includes the Executive Summary and Needs Assessment. This was informed by the content in Section 2: existing conditions research and observations, as well as the engagement process summary. See Section 2 and Section 3 for additional information.









# Executive Summary

Located at the heart of the city and county, San Lorenzo Park is a cherished but outdated park with unique potential to be transformative for Santa Cruz. The park and surrounding area may have been a site of the indigenous Awaswas-speaking Uypi tribe. Following the devastating 1955 flood, San Lorenzo Park was transformed into its current open space configuration. The park has held significant meaning to many people and peoples throughout history and it has served the city in profound ways during times of crisis. Yet the needs of the City of Santa Cruz have changed since the 1950s when the park was designed. The redesign effort will define the new needs, as well as the unique opportunities the park can offer to an evolving Santa Cruz and the park's diverse population of users.



San Lorenzo Park serves surrounding neighborhoods and is a downtown park



San Lorenzo Park serves the City of Santa Cruz





Located at the center of Santa Cruz County,  
San Lorenzo Park also serves the County

San Lorenzo Park Redesign



5 mi



# Park Transformation

Sources suggest that Santa Cruz was a significant site for indigenous villages of the Awaswas-speaking Uypi tribe that may have been located at or near the present-day San Lorenzo Park.\* For centuries, indigenous peoples tended to the land through restorative practices. Over time, San Lorenzo park became part of the growing and urbanizing city. Following the devastating 1955 flood, San Lorenzo Park was transformed into its current open space configuration as part of the San Lorenzo River flood-control project and the redevelopment of a large portion of the downtown area.

The park has held significant meaning to many people and peoples throughout history and it has served the city in profound ways during times of crisis. Since its opening, San Lorenzo Park has hosted memorable events, spaces for families and the community to enjoy, and recreational opportunities. The riverlands (formerly referred to as “the benchlands”)\*\* were transformed during the COVID pandemic into sanctioned and unsanctioned encampments. In 2022, the city returned the riverlands to a vacant open space and began a process of restoration. The redesign process began in December 2022 to envision the future for San Lorenzo Park as it transforms yet again to meet the current and future needs of Santa Cruz’s diverse community.

\* <https://coastal-watershed.org/the-meaning-of-aulintak/>  
Rizzo, M. A. (2016). No Somos Animales: Indigenous Survival and Perseverance in 19th Century Santa Cruz, California. UC Santa Cruz. Doctoral Dissertation, <http://www.protectjuristac.org/2020minilessons/>  
Michelle Lorimer & Shelley Brooks, (2019). Missions’ impact on environment and economy. Teaching California Curriculum Inquiry.

\*\*This project will refer to the benchlands as the riverlands, and the upland as the uplands.



Encampment in the riverlands during COVID pandemic, May 2022





Depiction of one of the indigenous peoples from the Monterey Bay area region, Amah Mutsun Tribal Band

Source: <https://www.amahmutsunlandtrust.org/the-tribal-band>



Santa Cruz flooded in 1955 flood



Plaque in park



Serpent play structure at San Lorenzo Park, approx. 1964



# A Dynamic Open Space

The extreme flood events of winter 2023 remind us that San Lorenzo Park is connected to a dynamic and regional ecological system much larger than the park itself. Designed to fill up in major storm events, the riverlands have historically flooded and are designed to manage large flood volumes. These dynamics define challenges and opportunities for this low-lying area. At roughly 6.3 acres, or 48.5% of the total park area, the riverlands function differently from the uplands and are restricted in the types of improvements and uses that can occur in the low-lying area.”

The confluence of San Lorenzo River and Branciforte Creek on the southwest edge of the park also presents a unique opportunity for the park. Confluences often have historical significance. The confluence today is hidden and forgotten. The spaces adjacent to the river offer valuable ecological potential and a reconnection to the river unique to the San Lorenzo Park segment of the river.



Confluence of San Lorenzo River and Branciforte Creek





Low-lying riverlands



Riverlands designed to flood, January 2023



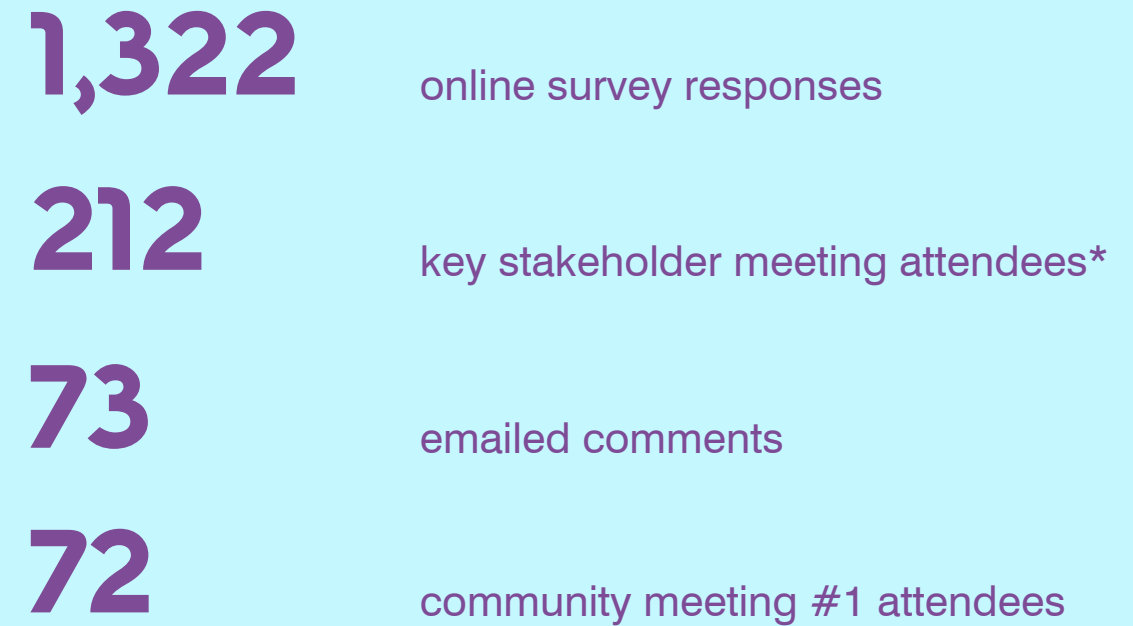
San Lorenzo River & Park



# Engagement to Identify Need

To identify and confirm the project needs, the design team and Parks and Recreation Department staff conducted extensive community engagement in Stage 1 of the redesign process in the form of key stakeholder meetings, email correspondence, 1 community meeting, and an on-line survey. The engagement process was designed to gauge preferences for programs and amenities that should be in the future park, as well as what aspects of the park people would like to see preserved and revitalized. Engagement tools asked respondents about demographics, park uses, the park today, and the park tomorrow. The process identified a range of diverse needs for San Lorenzo Park. The process also identified a broad consensus for a park that is usable, safe, activated, loved, and promotes ecology.

## Stage 1 Engagement by the Numbers



### Select Quotes

“San Lorenzo Park and the river are crown jewels in the city.”

“Restore sacredness to the land.”

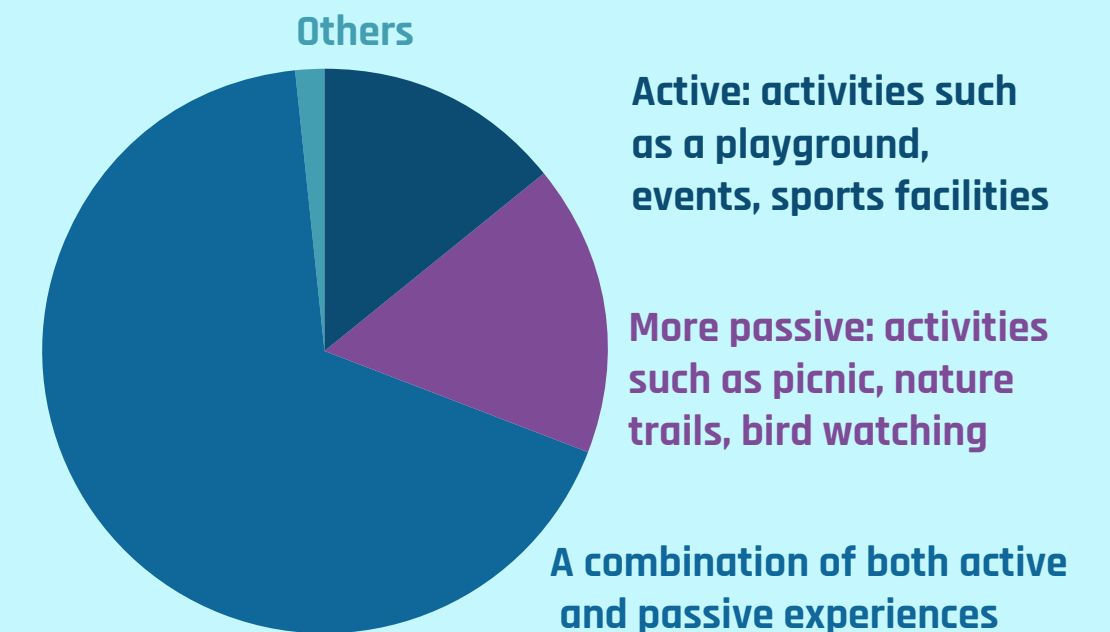
“We want to see the park as an asset to the community.”

“Keep Santa Cruz Memorable.”

### Top program recommendations

- Active Recreation
- Events
- Habitat Restoration
- Passive Recreation
- Playground

### Overall Park Experience



\* See section 2 for list of key stakeholder meetings and attendees.







Stage 1 Engagement Images





# Establishing Ambitious Opportunities, Principles & Goals

Based on the community engagement process, an analysis of the park's existing park features and conditions, and the city's maintenance and operational needs, Stage 1 identified ambitious and forward-thinking opportunities for San Lorenzo Park that can be accomplished through the guiding principles and design goals. These are defined in more detail in the needs assessment and will guide the redesign process in drafting alternatives, developing the concept plan, and informing the final plan.

## Park Opportunities

- Repositioning the Park for an Evolving City
- Promoting Traditions & a Civic Destination
- Preserving & Revitalized Existing Park Features
- Restoring Ecology
- Prioritizing Inclusivity
- Designing for Safety & Operations
- Fostering Partnerships & Stewardship

## Guiding Principles

- Keep the park clean, safe, and secure.
- Make the park uniquely Santa Cruz and reflect our culture.
- Activate the park.
- Make the park a sustainable green space for everyone.
- Promote biodiversity and natural habitat.
- Create a park that attracts the community and visitors.
- Offer a range of activities, events, and programs for all ages and abilities.
- Increase visibility and accessibility of the park and river.





## Design Goals

- Design a park that is sustainable and maintainable.
- Include a range of spaces for passive recreation such as trails, picnic areas, walking, and bird watching.
- Include a playground for all ages and abilities with natural, climbing, and interactive elements.
- Provide facilities including restrooms, drinking fountains, waste receptacles, and seating.
- Conduct restoration projects in the riverlands to promote native plant species.
- Include a range of spaces for active recreation and different programs.
- Promote opportunities for environmental and historical education.
- Connect to the river for education, unique encounters, and stewardship.
- Create prominent entries and connections to the park.
- Create venues for different size events and festivals.
- Design for multi-modal access.
- Preserve heritage trees.



# Needs Assessment

Community engagement, an analysis of the existing park features and conditions, and an understanding of the City's maintenance and operational needs have informed the needs assessment. Included in this chapter are ambitious and forward-thinking opportunities for San Lorenzo Park that capture the ideas and aspirations of the community. The opportunities are derived from the unique aspects of the park, its location, and the community's needs. The opportunities can be accomplished through the guiding principles and design goals. The need assessment, including the opportunities, principles, goals, and potential programs will inform the design alternatives, the concept plan, and the final plan developed in the redesign process. The complete research and analysis of existing conditions, and the engagement process can be found in Section 2, Existing Conditions Research and Observations & Engagement Process.





# REIMAGINE SAN LORENZO PARK 2023



**What should  
it be?**

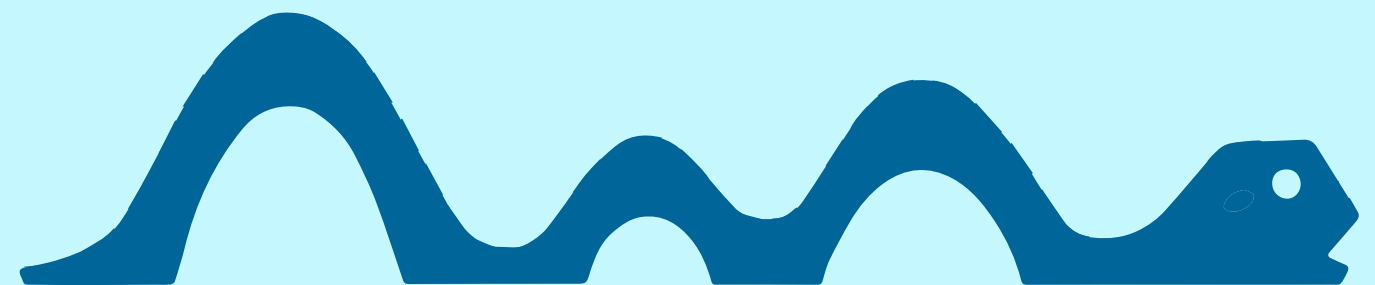


# Opportunities

San Lorenzo Park has the potential to be transformative in unique and profound ways for Santa Cruz. Seven opportunities are identified here to redesign San Lorenzo Park as a modern urban park that is equipped to respond to the evolving needs of a growing city with changing climatic conditions.

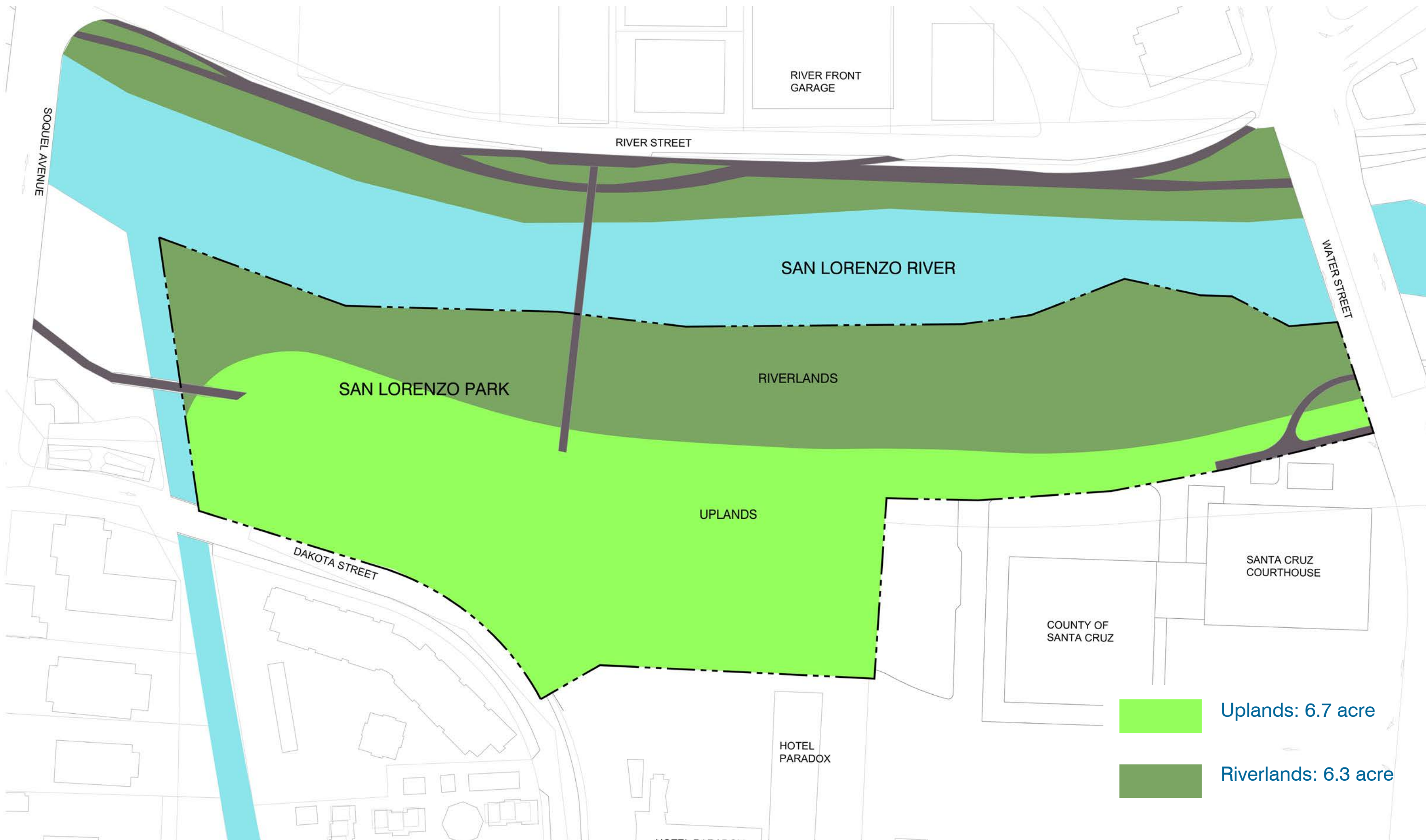
As part of the transformation of San Lorenzo Park, this project includes re-branding certain terminology and definitions formerly used for areas of San Lorenzo Park. Formerly referred to as the “benchlands”, this project will refer to the lower-lying areas adjacent to the river as the “riverlands”. Formerly referred to as the “upland”, this project will refer to the areas at higher elevations adjacent to Dakota Avenue and the trail as the “uplands”.

During the engagement process, it also became clear that “Lorenzo” the sea serpent is a cherished part of the park. This effort embraces Lorenzo as an important icon for the park and has incorporated a logo of Lorenzo into the design process.



Logo of “Lorenzo” the sea serpent





 Uplands: 6.7 acre  
 Riverlands: 6.3 acre



# Repositioning the Park for an Evolving City

San Lorenzo Park was designed and built in the 1950-1960s for a city with very different needs than today. Santa Cruz is growing and evolving. And the City's needs and priorities have and are changing. San Lorenzo Park should be repositioned to support the city's evolution, its growing downtown, and the surrounding communities. There are unique opportunities at the park to offer new resources and amenities. Repositioning the park as a downtown park and a valuable asset for the city is critical.

Improvements that could assist in repositioning the park may include creating signature entries at prominent locations to transform the experience of finding and entering the park, as well as creating a new circulation network (see facing page) that could better connect the park to the downtown and neighborhoods to increase the visibility of the park for access, safety, and usership.

Prominent Entry Locations







Potential New Connections & Circulation Framework

Trail

Entrance



# Promoting Traditions & A Civic Destination

Santa Cruz has many unique and valuable attributes, cultures, peoples, inventions, destinations, traditions, and identities. The park has historically been used to host events and boasts signature annual traditions that represent some cultures and aspects of Santa Cruz. The park redesign should honor these traditions, increase the opportunity to host events and traditions for other cultures and peoples, and create spaces for new events, festivals, and traditions to occur. It has the potential to not only support the community, but also to be uniquely Santa Cruz. The redesign process should embrace what is unique about Santa Cruz as fundamental to the design.

Right: Unique  
Santa Cruz  
Features







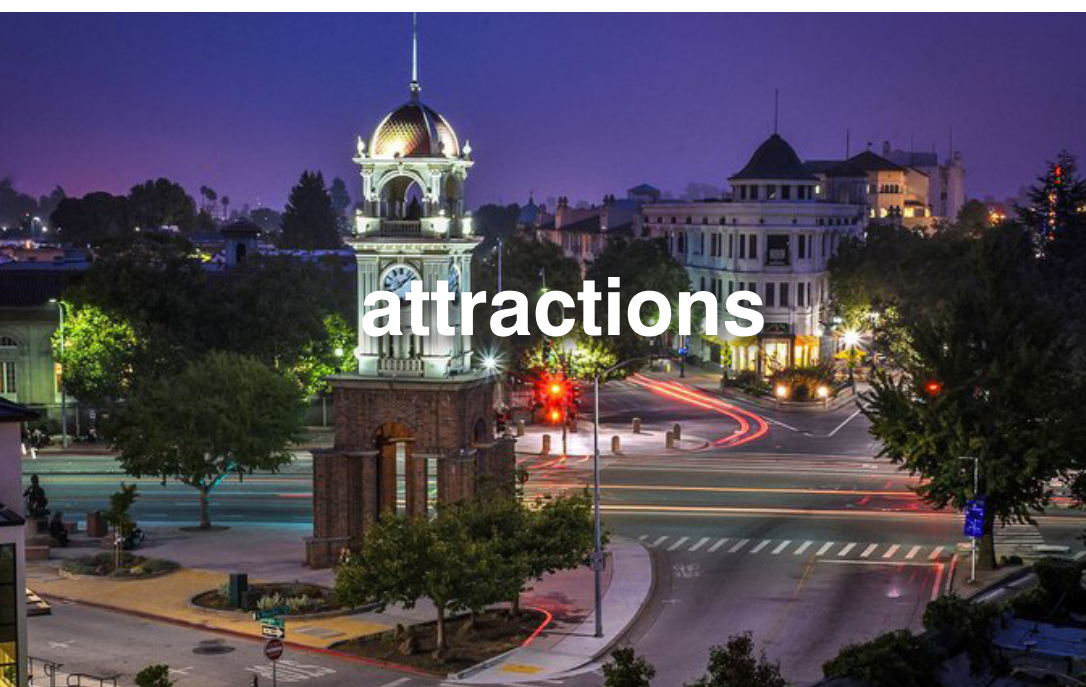
**ocean**



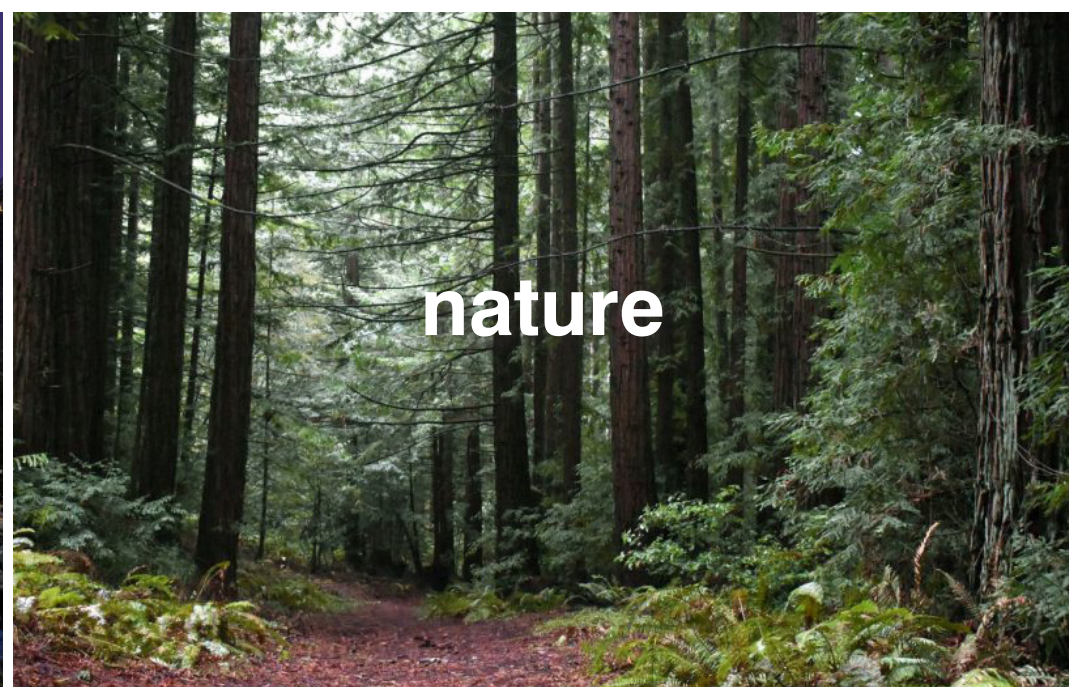
**surfing**



**ecology**



**attractions**



**nature**



**recreation**



**history**



**arts & culture**



**events**



# Preserving & Revitalized Existing Park Features

The park today has a number of cherished features including the sea serpent “Lorenzo”, the pond, the river, the mature trees, and the Chinatown Bridge. All exist in different conditions: some will be refurbished like “Lorenzo” the sea serpent that will be repainted summer 2023 thanks to the passion and initiative of neighbors and park partners, while others are degraded and in need of significant repair like the pond that leaks frequently.

It is recommended that the City study the feasibility of renovating some of these features to preserve them in their current location and configuration, or if the features need to be relocated or updated. The City should also evaluate the costs of renovating and maintaining the features on a long term basis in conjunction with usership and other competing needs and opportunities for the park.

The existing heritage tree canopy is a valuable urban forest asset that should be preserved. Based on the tree drip line and root zone, there are select locations within the park where improvements for new programs can occur. This constraint will inform the redesign options available while preserving this existing park feature.

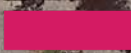



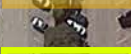



Top to bottom: Mature trees and San Lorenzo River, the Chinatown Bridge, sea serpent “Lorenzo”, the pond. (resource : serpent-Coastal Watershed Council-<https://coastal-watershed.org/seeking-artist-to-guide-san-lorenzo-park-community-project/>)





Available Space Based on  
Mature Tree Drip Line

-  Pond & Lawn Bowling:
-  Benchlands: 3.56 acre
-  Upland: 2.48 acre
-  Playground & Building
-  Tree Drip
-  Trail



# Restoring Ecology

The extreme flood events of winter 2023 remind us that San Lorenzo Park is connected to a dynamic and regional ecological system much larger than the park itself. Portions of the park are designed to flood. The park already hosts numerous wildlife species along the river and in the park. It has the potential for ecological restoration to allow for broadened biodiversity. A resilient park design will restore native ecologies to the greatest extent possible. It will be designed to adapt to evolving and uncertain climatic changes. And it will encourage a cultural interface with the river and habitats for stewardship, environmental education, and a more connected relationship with the native ecologies.







San Lorenzo River & Park provide habitat for swallows, great horned owls, wood ducks, spawning Coho salmons, seals, and steelhead trout.



# Prioritizing Inclusivity

The engagement and needs assessment showed that park and open space needs in Santa Cruz have changed since the park was designed and built in the 1950s and 1960s. An inclusive park designed for all cultures, ages, backgrounds, languages, and abilities will prioritize and broaden the usability of and equity of access to open space and recreational amenities in the park. The redesign should prioritize inclusivity in all aspects of the park design. Representation of cultures and peoples from all stages of history should be included as part of the design and as educational components. And programmatic elements should be designed for all ages and abilities to participate.







Dolores Park Precedent for  
Inclusivity in Open Space



# Designing for Safety & Operations

Safety was one of the top priorities for stakeholders and is fundamental for a usable park. The redesign effort can equip the park with the tools and infrastructure to manage an urban park and all of the contemporary challenges it faces. Facilities and infrastructure for operational efficiency and safety have spatial requirements that need to be incorporated into the design for long-term success. The city will also need to evaluate the fiscal and regulatory requirements that park safety and operations will require in current and future urban condition for long-term safety and security. Francisco park in San Francisco includes a new maintenance facility designed as part of the restroom facilities to maintain and operate the new park and serves as a precedent for San Lorenzo Park.







Francisco Park, San Francisco  
Includes a new maintenance and  
restroom facility



# Fostering Partnerships & Stewardship

There are many stakeholders interested in the success of the park. The redesign presents unique opportunities to convene and organize people and resources to support the park through management and financing strategies outside of the norm. Based on conversations with stakeholders, the city could foster new partnerships and relationships to fund, build, maintain, and support the park by working with key partners and park stewards. The Presidio Tunnel Tops park in San Francisco was envisioned and realized through the many partnerships within San Francisco, and can serve as an example for Santa Cruz and San Lorenzo Park.







**City of Toronto urban tree forest planting stewardship event.**  
<https://www.toronto.ca/community-people/get-involved/volunteer-with-the-city/tree-planting-stewardship/>

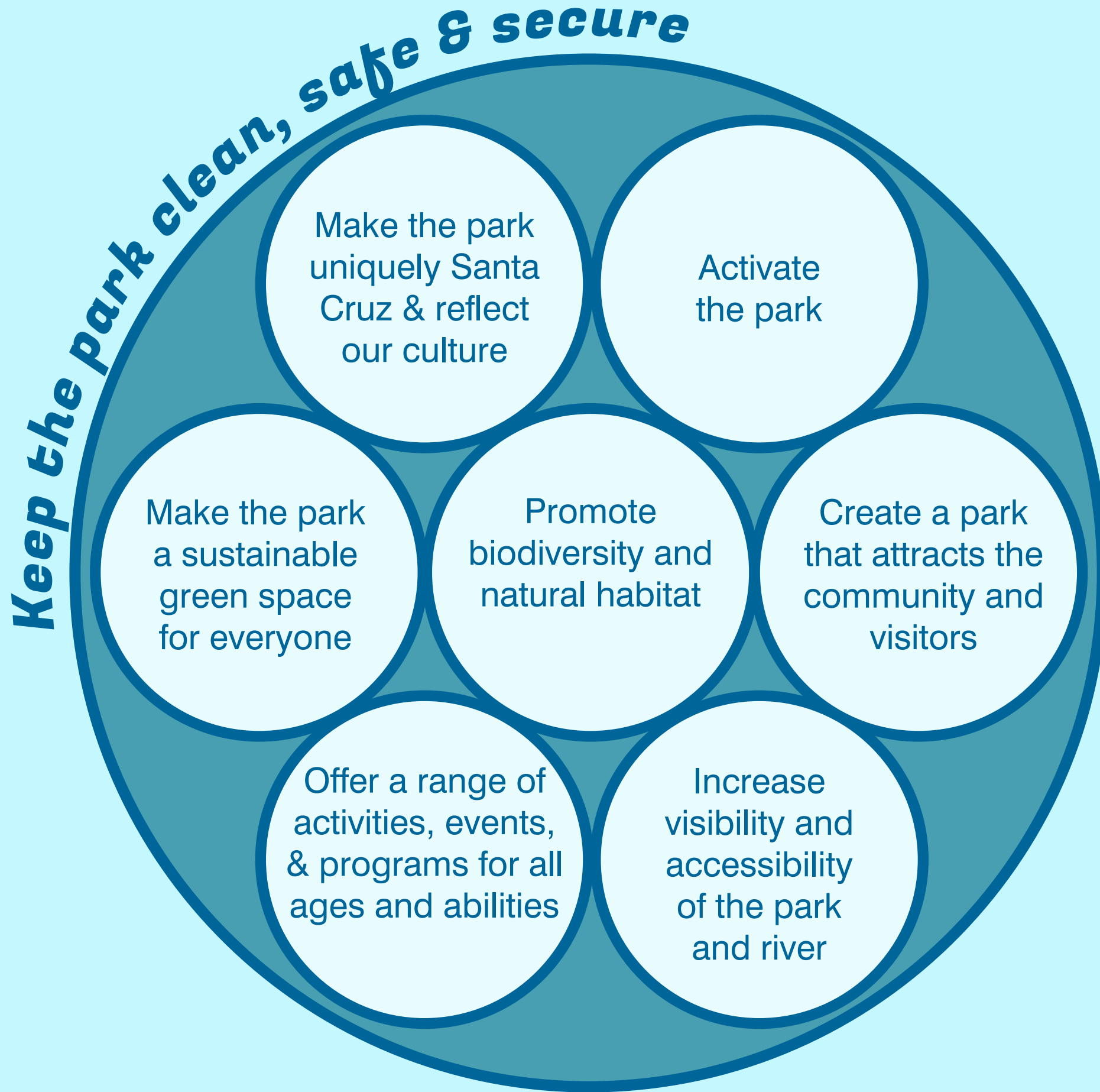


# Guiding Principles

The guiding principles are established to guide the ambitions and vision for San Lorenzo Park, and accomplish the forward-thinking opportunities. The principles reflect the sentiments and needs heard from the diverse stakeholder groups and individuals that care about, use, and maintain the park. All future design efforts should embrace these principles as integral to the design and future for San Lorenzo Park.







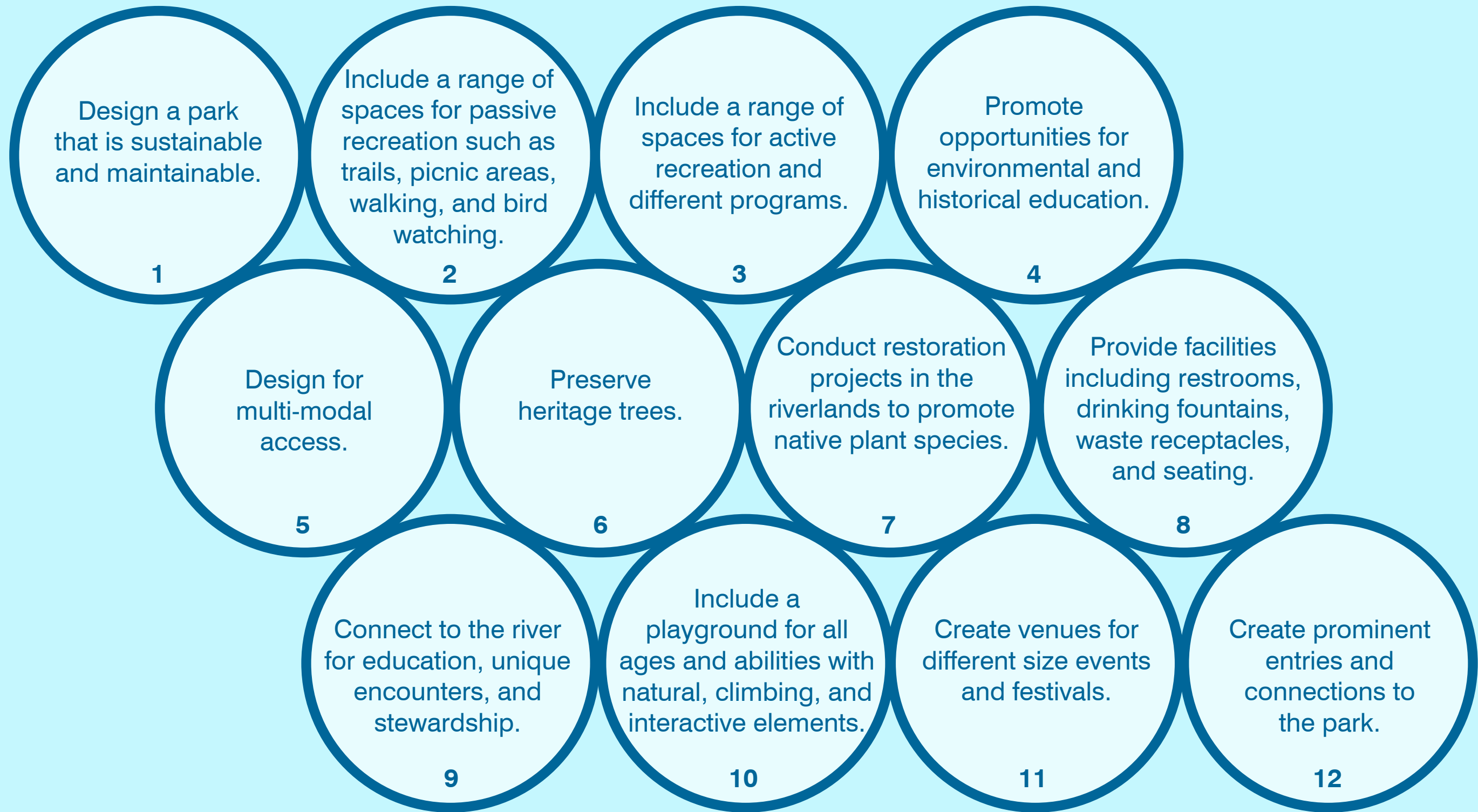


# Design Goals



The design goals are measurable and tactical strategies for the design to achieve the ambitious principles for San Lorenzo Park. The goals reflect the ideas and needs heard from the diverse stakeholder groups and individuals that care about, use, and maintain the park. All future design efforts should employ the design goals to envision a park that is beautiful, usable, cherished, fundable, constructible, supported, and loved.







Design a park that is sustainable and maintainable.

1



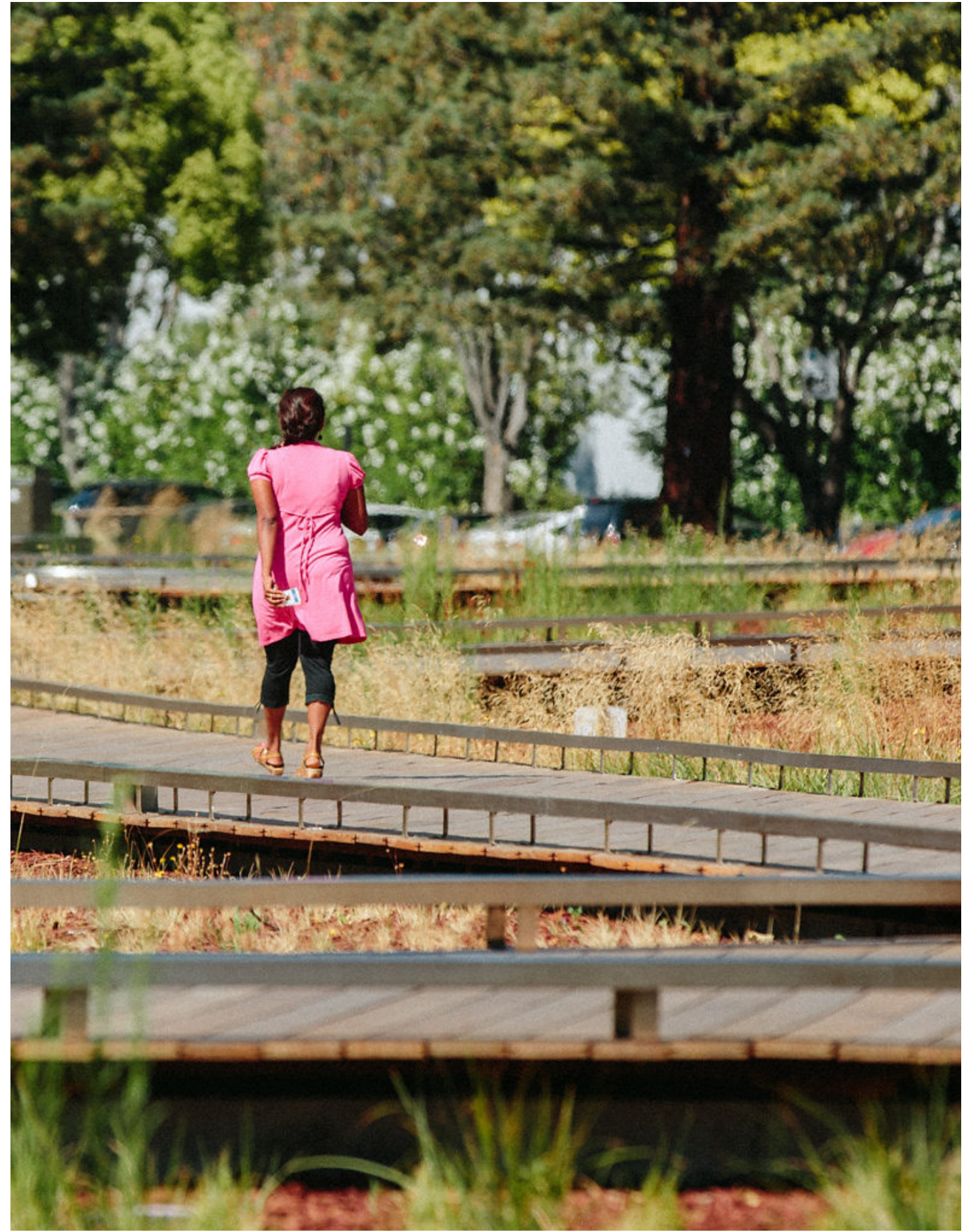
Include a range of spaces for passive recreation such as trails, picnic areas, walking, and bird watching.

2



Include a range of spaces for active recreation and different programs.

3







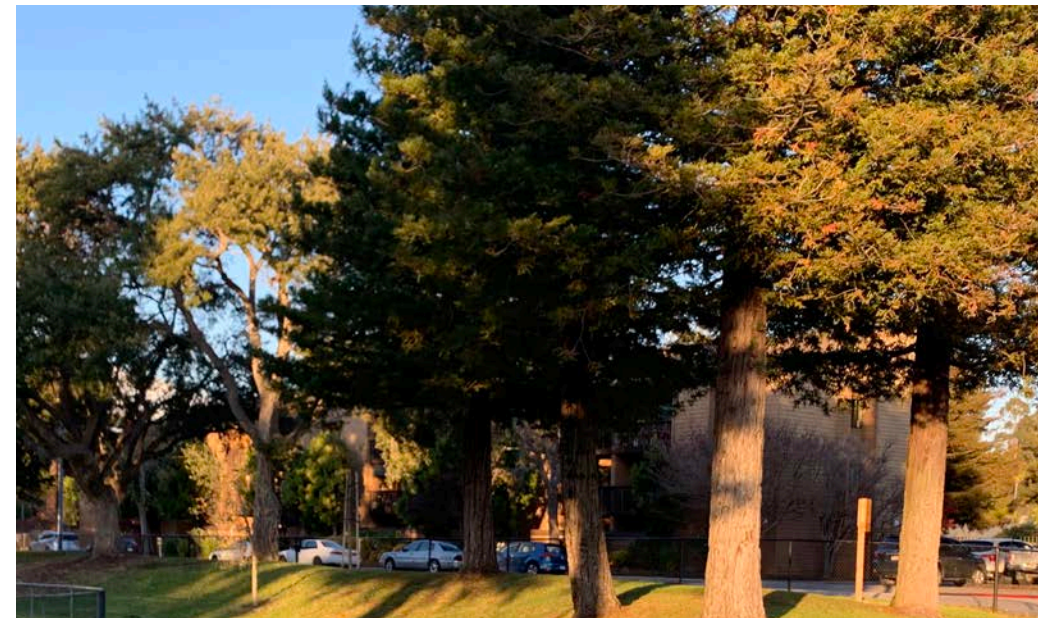
Promote opportunities for environmental and historical education.

4



Design for multi-modal access.

5



Preserve heritage trees.

6



Conduct restoration projects in the riverlands to promote native plant species.

7



Provide facilities such as restrooms, drinking fountains, waste receptacles, and seating.

8



Connect to the river for education, unique encounters, and stewardship.

9







Include a playground for all ages & abilities with natural, climbing, & interactive elements.  
**10**



Create venues for different size events and festivals.  
**11**



Create prominent entries and connections to the park.  
**12**



# Potential Programs

The right program mix for San Lorenzo Park will help keep the park active, safe, and secure throughout the day and year. Selection of the final program mix for San Lorenzo park will occur as part of the design process and will vary depending on feasibility for inclusion of such programs. The list here and images of the facing page represent programs to consider during the design process for San Lorenzo Park. These program ideas are based on previous design efforts and preferences identified in the engagement conducted in Stage 1 of the redesign process. This selection should be considered a starting point for activating San Lorenzo Park in the future and providing a range of program offerings for the diverse park users.

## Potential Program List

- Amphitheater
- Art / Sculptures
- Basketball
- Bocce Ball
- Conservatory
- Disc golf
- Food & Beverage
- Garden
- Ice Skating
- Lawn
- Lawn Bowling
- Outdoor Fitness
- Pickleball
- Picnic Areas
- Playground
- Plaza
- Pump track
- Recreation Center
- Restoration Area
- River overlooks / viewing platform
- Roller Skating
- Slackline
- Soccer
- Stage
- Tennis
- View tower
- Volleyball
- Water feature
- Zipline



















CITY OF SANTA CRUZ  
**AND** **PARKS**  
**RECREATION**