



Midpeninsula Regional
Open Space District

R-24-143
Meeting 24-31
December 3, 2024

AGENDA ITEM 1

AGENDA ITEM

Environmental Scan and Strategic Plan Goals and Objectives for Fiscal Year 2025-26

GENERAL MANAGER'S RECOMMENDATIONS

Consider the results of the annual environmental scan and review, update if needed, and adopt the Fiscal Year 2025-26 Strategic Plan Goals and Objectives to guide the development of the Fiscal Year 2025-26 Budget and Capital Improvement and Action Plan.

SUMMARY

Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District's (Midpen, District) annual strategic planning retreat provides the Board of Directors (Board) with a valuable opportunity to set the overall course for the coming fiscal year at a broad policy level. By engaging in a comprehensive review of the 2024 Environmental Scan Report (Attachment 1) and proposed FY26 Strategic Plan Goals and Objectives (Attachment 2), the Board can ensure that the organization is well-positioned to address emerging challenges and capitalize on new opportunities. At the retreat, the Board may identify areas where the Strategic Plan Goals and Objectives need to be updated or revised to better align with the organization's evolving needs and priorities.

DISCUSSION

Environmental Scan Findings

The external environment presents several challenges and opportunities for Midpen. Supply chain disruptions, constraints on the availability of consultants, and the rising costs of goods and services hinder project implementation and increase operational costs. Additionally, recruiting and retaining qualified staff remains difficult, especially for administrative positions. Community engagement is necessary and requires proper timing and careful balancing to maintain project momentum. The evolving media landscape and increasing public expectations for diversity, equity, and inclusion necessitate adaptability and proactive measures. Changes in local and federal government leadership may impact future support for Midpen's initiatives, while permitting challenges and regulatory changes pose significant risks to project timelines and outcomes.

Internally, Midpen is focused on refining its compensation philosophy and expanding career ladders to improve recruitment and retention. The organization is investing in employee training and technological solutions to enhance efficiency and operational effectiveness. Cybersecurity and GIS data management remain high priorities to safeguard sensitive information and inform

decision-making. Partnerships remain crucial to support project delivery. Vetting new initiatives against the available capacity and its alignment with Midpen's mission and core goals, as well as its potential impacts to the annual workplan, are critical for the Board to make a fully informed decision on whether to proceed with the item.

By addressing these challenges and capitalizing on emerging opportunities, Midpen can continue to fulfill its mission of protecting and preserving the environment for future generations.

Proposed Updates to the Strategic Plan Goals and Objectives

In 2011, the Board adopted a comprehensive Strategic Plan (R-11-96) to guide the District's long-term direction. Since then, the Board has annually reviewed and updated this plan to account for new opportunities and challenges in response to prior environmental scan considerations, ensuring ongoing successful implementation of the District's mission. After reviewing the 2024 Environmental Scan Report, the General Manager offers the following food for thought as the Board discusses potential edits to the Strategic Plan Goals and Objectives for FY25 (refer also to Attachment 2):

Goal 4, Objective 1 – Provide the necessary resources, tools, training, staff facilities, and infrastructure, including technology upgrades, ~~and~~ capacity building and safeguards to address cybersecurity threats and future natural disasters

Goal 4, Objective 2 - Effectively and efficiently deliver Vision Plan projects and priority initiatives by implementing recommendations in the updated 2023 financial and operational sustainability model to guide operational growth and areas of focus, and facilitate project momentum

Goal 4, Objective 3 – Evaluate new initiatives against the District's mission, strategic goals and objectives and internal capacity/workplan to confirm alignment and state of readiness
~~Maintain a state of readiness for potential disruptions and leverage new resiliency practices and procedures to improve business operations, public participation, and communications~~

FISCAL IMPACT

There is no immediate fiscal impact associated with the recommended actions.

PRIOR BOARD AND COMMITTEE REVIEW

None.

PUBLIC NOTICE

Public notice was provided as required by the Brown Act.

CEQA COMPLIANCE

This item is not subject to the California Environmental Quality Act.

NEXT STEPS

On March 5, 2025, the Board will convene a second retreat which will entail a detailed discussion and confirmation of the organization's priorities for FY26. These priorities will serve as the guiding principles for the subsequent development of the FY26 Budget and Action Plan.

Attachments:

1. 2024 Environmental Scan Report
2. FY26 Strategic Plan Goals and Objectives

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2024 Environmental Scan Summary

I. Purpose

The purpose of the environmental scan is to gather information on external and internal environments to identify the most urgent challenges and opportunities facing Midpen. The results of the environmental scan serve to inform updates to the Strategic Plan, which sets the directional course for the coming year at a broad policy level.

II. Key External Findings

Economic and Labor Conditions

- **Constraints on equipment and external consulting services:** Supply chain disruptions in the delivery of new fleet vehicles and information technology (IT) equipment/laptops continues, requiring Midpen to extend the use of older vehicles and IT equipment in the interim, and diverting more staff time to address maintenance and repair issues. Also, limited and over-booked consultant availability in the Bay Area, particularly in the biological and environmental services, is causing delays in project implementation as it is becoming increasingly difficult to schedule these services when needed for projects (e.g., biological monitoring for construction work).
- **Costs for goods and services:** Due to the rise of costs for goods and services over the last few years related to inflation, routine activities are often exceeding the General Manager's \$52,000 purchasing authority. As a result, more and more standard procurement items require Board review and approval – adding an additional step to the procurement process. Increasing the General Manager's signing authority would expedite turnaround times on procurement contracts to move projects forward. Also, attempts to establish more on-call contracts for routine services, such as for plumbing, fencing and electrical services, is becoming challenging as more firms and companies decline Midpen work to avoid public contracting rules, including state reporting and prevailing wage requirements.
- **Grants and outside funding challenges:** With the continued state budget deficit, numerous grant funding programs have been cut or significantly curtailed for open space land acquisitions and restoration work. However, the Climate Bond (Proposition 4) passed in California on November 5 and is expected to help fill in state funding gaps for conservation and land management work. Local cities and counties are experiencing their own funding issues due to reduced revenues, affecting their ability to partner and contribute towards shared projects (examples are the public access improvements on the Johnston Property with the City of Half Moon Bay and realignment of the Alpine Road Trail with the Town of Portola Valley). At the federal level, with the change in administration, funds that are not already obligated as part of federal grant programs, particularly those related to climate resiliency, land conservation, and species protection, may be curtailed. Moreover, Midpen has noticed that federal grant funding reimbursements are taking extra time to process.
- **Recruitment and retention:** As part of recruitments, Midpen is beginning to see increases in the number of applications received for most vacant positions, however, the

average number of qualified applicants who reach the first and second interviews continues to remain relatively low. Specific to ranger and maintenance positions, with the recent salary and benefit enhancements for these job classifications, Midpen has experienced a modest uptick in the number of applications received. For administrative positions, the hybrid work arrangements help to retain and attract talent, however, the high competition for local labor and the availability of promotional opportunities outside of Midpen have made it difficult to retain new employees for more than three years.

Community and Stakeholders

- **Timing of community engagement and maintaining project momentum:** Comprehensive outreach to involve community members in project planning and design is a Midpen core value that aligns well with community expectations. Two key considerations for Midpen are (1) the timing for robust public engagement and (2) maintaining project delivery momentum once public engagement is conducted to support effective implementation. Long lag times between public engagement and implementation can result in the loss of institutional memory and a shift in stakeholders that can result in a loss of public support for prior Midpen decisions, leading to unexpected new round(s) of public engagement that can dramatically extend project timelines, draw on internal resources that are already fully assigned to other activities and result in higher overall direct costs related to year-over-year inflation. The re-evaluation of the Bear Creek Stables (BCS) Repair Plan through the Ad Hoc Committee process is a recent example. The potential for similar outcomes exists with other Midpen projects that are taking five plus years from conceptual approval to construction.
- **Diversity, equity and inclusion:** The growing awareness of social movements to address systemic inequities and historic societal injustices extends to the workforce, with expectations for employers to be part of the solution, intentionally addressing diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) as part of their work. For Midpen, DEI applies in numerous ways, such as recruitment outreach and pipelines, access to nature, partnerships, contracting processes, grant making, nature education, public engagement, disability accommodations, tribal relationships and reconnections to the land, and forms of communication. Other agencies are also embedding these priorities in their work, including through their external grant programs that now incorporate DEI requirements for funding eligibility. Furthermore, outside local, state and federal elected officials often inquire about Midpen's DEI efforts, indicating external expectations for Midpen to be part of this effort. Midpen's Agricultural Policy and its intentional incorporation of DEI values in the overarching goals and objectives, which was a new approach, serves as a model for other agencies and internally when updating other Midpen policies.
- **Evolving media consumption:** The way communities interact with media is rapidly changing. The rise and fall of social media platforms, along with a declining reliance on traditional print media, means that Midpen's outreach strategies should remain flexible and innovative to adapt with new communication styles and meet audiences where they are. Midpen would also benefit from expanding its social media platforms and how content is displayed to attract viewership, likes, hashtags and followers, thereby extending its reach to broader audiences.

- Public access management:** As Midpen continues to fulfill its commitments under the voter-approved Measure AA and opens new preserve sites and trails to public access with the accompanying new parking areas, ongoing communications and responsiveness to neighbor concerns remains essential in maintaining good neighbor relations and avoiding potential public use conflicts. Furthermore, as new public access projects are pursued, effective outreach and communications with major stakeholders like Green Foothills and Audubon Society are necessary to solicit feedback early and incorporate appropriate adjustments at the beginning of project design to maintain momentum during the latter half of project schedules. At the same time, although outside advocates can provide valuable input, it is important to remember that Midpen's professional staff can be relied on for their extensive knowledge and expertise gained through experience, research work, academic training, peer consultations, prior project experience and reviews of external scientific journals and papers.
- Communicating the purpose and value of Midpen's mission:** For numerous years, the Bay Area region has been experiencing a notable emigration and migration of residents. With these changes in the population, implementing strong public education programs to expand awareness of Midpen's mission and the distinction between Midpen Preserves and County Parks is very important. Midpen's mission and land management practices are different from those of park agencies, with a central focus on natural resource protection – which guides land conservation (what lands Midpen purchases), and the type of public access provided (ecologically-sensitive public enjoyment and education). A lack of understanding or misinterpretation of Midpen's focused purpose can lead to confusion or frustration by the public. However, once the public understands how the work of Midpen complements and is an important balance for the work and services provided by park agencies, the public will by and large readily value and support Midpen's mission and policies.

Political and Regulatory Factors

- Changes in local government leadership:** Numerous key city/town and county changes in leadership, due to either elections or new employment, may affect future support for Midpen initiatives. For example, the departure of key town officials in Portola Valley has resulted in slower communication and permitting coordination, which could have serious implications for the project schedules to implement the Hawthorns Area Plan and the repairs to structures within the Hawthorns Historic Complex. In Santa Clara County, Supervisors Simitian and Chavez, both champions for Midpen, will be leaving their posts by the end of the calendar year. In Santa Mateo County, Supervisors Pine and Slocum are terming out, two other strong supporters of Midpen. All four supervisors have supported various funding requests and advocated for Midpen projects through their affiliations and networks with other external agencies and organizations.
- Change in congressional representation:** Congresswoman Anna Eshoo's retirement is a loss for environmental and conservation initiatives. Cultivating a strong relationship with the new representative, Congressman-elect Sam Liccardo, is important to retain federal support for conservation, natural resource protection, climate resiliency and outdoor nature recreation.

- **Permitting challenges and impacts to projects:** Limited capacity and high turnover within permitting agencies, such as with the Town of Portola Valley and County of Santa Clara, pose significant challenges to project schedules. Delays in regulatory consultations hinder project planning and delivery, complicating Midpen's ability to maintain project momentum. Related, permitting reviews and approvals have become increasingly time-consuming, complicated and with many more monitoring requirements and conditions of approval. As a result, the allocations of additional staff capacity and funding are required to obtain permits and comply with the permit requirements that can span five years (e.g., multi-year monitoring of newly planted sites). Midpen would benefit from finding self-permitting avenues for less controversial, standard practice actions (i.e., grading permits for new trail construction, building permits for trail bridges) that can be supported by local jurisdictions to reduce permitting delays and total costs.
- **SB 610:** The Fire Hazard Severity Zone (FHSZ) classification system is a science-based model for evaluating the severity of a fire hazard based on physical conditions that create expected fire conditions. The FHSZ currently does not account for level of risk, including fire mitigation measures that reduce fire risk in an area. A potential overhaul of the FHSZ classification system is being explored at the state level that would develop Wildland Mitigation Areas with a set of minimum fire mitigation requirements to reduce fire risk in wildland areas. Such a change to the FHSZ, if passed, could facilitate development, including the expansion of housing, into wildland-urban interface areas, impacting wildlife corridors, increasing development pressures in open spaces and increasing conflicting uses and behaviors between wildlife/natural habitats and people (e.g., use of rodenticides, predation, light pollution, etc.).

III. Key Internal Findings

Organizational Culture, Structure and Alignment

- **Compensation philosophy:** The ongoing review of Midpen's compensation philosophy is of high interest to staff and affects staff morale and retention. Evaluating the compensation philosophy with consideration of the intricacy and scale of project and program delivery is important.
- **Career ladders:** Given the growth of the organization in the last 10 years and the anticipated growth in the next 9 years, it is now timely to consider expanding career ladders within various classification series. This action would reflect Midpen's evolving organizational needs and greater spectrum of project and program complexity that exists within the annual workplan. In addition, this action would also increase staff retention by further recognizing the varying degrees of independent and multi-faceted work managed by employees throughout their career journey at Midpen.
- **Midpen effectiveness and core work:** Although Midpen's culture of excellence, professionalism and competence contributes to the agency's effectiveness of achieving its annual goals, it can entice Midpen to stray outside of its core mission. Although Midpen has proven to be very effective and productive in moving forward new initiatives, when the work lies on the periphery or is more central to the work of other entities, it is worth taking a step back to determine whether the best course of action is to allow partners to

take the lead and/or to support their work in less time-consuming ways to avoid compromising on Midpen's highest goals and central purpose.

Operational Resources and Performance

- **Employment pipeline:** Midpen's growing internship program is proving successful in furthering its DEI goals, creating a new pipeline for full-time, entry-level employment, expanding capacity within departments, inspiring young professionals to consider a career in land conservation and/or public service and demonstrating tangible benefits of DEI efforts to the public, staff, partners and local community leaders. Related, holding a region-wide recruitment faire focused on careers in land conservation that targets local colleges, universities and trade schools can spark a wave of new candidate interests for jobs at Midpen. By joining forces with other open space and park agencies, the magnitude of job applicant interest and overall benefits to Midpen and our partners would compound significantly.
- **Employee trainings:** Ongoing employee trainings of systems, new software, policies and procedures is necessary to ensure consistent and efficient project and program delivery throughout Midpen. Given Midpen's size and growth and the number of new staff who are onboarded each year, ongoing training is essential. Currently, the level of training and clear understanding varies greatly across the organization.
- **Technological solutions:** Technology continues to play an important role in scaling up internal operations. Additional IT solutions, including new project management software and AI tools, can be considered to further streamline processes, enhance efficiencies and support Midpen's innovative land management strategies and data-grounded decision-making.
- **Cybersecurity:** Protecting against increasingly sophisticated cybersecurity threats is a growing concern. Cybersecurity threats pose a risk to the organization's security, finances, and data. The groundwork laid by the Cybersecurity Assessment Project is improving Midpen's security posture, safeguarding infrastructure and data. However, ongoing vigilance and new security measures are required to effectively adapt to the ever-changing threat.
- **GIS and data management improvements:** The implementation of the GIS Strategic Plan is already showing improvements in resource allocation and decision-making. However, there are still challenges with data acquisition and consistencies in data input and with consultant compliance in how data is captured and delivered. These issues are being addressed and the ongoing integration of the GIS roadmap will lead to smarter, more innovative operational use of data in the future.
- **Wildfire resilience:** The use of prescribed fire currently depends heavily on the lead participation of CalFire to take full responsibility and liability for these events. Therefore, the scheduling and timing of future prescribed fire events depends on CalFire willingness and availability. With more than 15 years of no prescribed fire activities on Midpen lands, Midpen staff are beginning to train again for these events as they apply to Midpen properties and in meeting Midpen and local requirements and expectations. For Midpen to consider taking a future lead role in staffing and initiating future prescribed

burns, additional trainings are necessary to strengthen internal expertise, as well as more formal arrangements with local firefighting agencies. In the meantime, Midpen would benefit from further deepening its partnerships with CalFire and local fire agencies, seeking opportunities for managing Midpen's liability related to prescribed burns (including through legislative solutions) and bolstering its fire program with the necessary tools, personnel and equipment.

- **Partnerships:** Diverse partnerships with a broad spectrum of partners as the San Mateo Resource Conservation District, the San Jose Conservation Corps and Valley Transportation Agency have enhanced Midpen's project and program capacity and level of regional collaboration. These partnerships focus heavily on accomplishing actions that further Midpen's core work (fisheries restoration, fuel management to reduce catastrophic fire risk that can damage wildland habitats, and trail and wildlife connectivity). Midpen is also beginning to explore other potential partnerships related to specific programming interests and desires from special interest groups. This includes working with a non-profit organization to operate and manage Bear Creek Stables and another to operate and manage the Lower Barn at the Hawthorns Historic Complex. The success of these types of partnerships lies partly in being able to successfully separate Midpen from the day-to-day operational actions and decisions. As a public agency, the desire to remain responsive to the public can make it very hard for Midpen to maintain this separation. However, to allow partners to be responsible for their work and allow Midpen to remain within "its lane" and focused on its core work, a separation is essential. With this in mind, Midpen would need to gain comfort in relying on periodically scheduled reviews to discuss issues (unless related to safety or illegal activities that require immediate attention) to avoid being consumed with addressing a myriad of public critiques and concerns.
- **Internal capacity:** Unexpected new assignments during the fiscal year that are not accounted for in the annual workplan, such as formation of the Bear Creek Stables Ad Hoc Committee, development of Parking Area Design Guidelines and pursuit of the Historic Hawthorns Complex – Lower Barn partnership, has affected internal capacity to carry out the original work plan, resulting in delays to certain project schedules. For the Board to fully consider and vet requests for new assignments, it would be prudent to have these requests come back to the Board (if supported by a majority) with an analysis of the level of effort required and the impacts, if any, to the approved workplan. This step would allow the Board to make well informed decisions about the workplan and whether or not to pursue the new initiative, avoid surprises amongst Board members about the resulting impacts to other programs and projects, and set clear direction and alignment across the organization. For clarity, it would be helpful to memorialize such procedures within a Board Policy.
- **Natural resource protections:** With the growth of the capital improvement program and expansion of public access projects, additional support from the Natural Resources Department has been necessary to evaluate potential natural resource impacts and identify avoidance and mitigation measures. Additional capacity, as recommended by the Financial and Operational Sustainability Model (FOSM) Refresh in resource agency permitting will help alleviate the added demands for this type of support.

IV. Recommendations

- Midpen faces many challenges that can significantly slow down project momentum, causing delays in schedules, increased costs and diminishing institutional knowledge and public support for final implementation. Loss of project momentum is also of great concern for Midpen's success in accomplishing its Measure AA commitments within the 30-year timeframe for issuing bonds (i.e., all project bonds must be issued by 2044). As the agency expands its staffing capacity, the Board may want to consider keeping the project load near the current levels to allow the expanded Midpen workforce to move projects forward faster per year, with more time set aside per project to anticipate and more quickly resolve obstacles – including permitting issues. This is akin to moving three projects 10 feet forward per year versus moving 10 projects three feet forward per year. Other strategies include increasing the General Manager's purchasing authority, applying self-permitting authority for discreet and straight-forward actions and a written policy that supports the Board in more fully vetting unexpected new assignments to confirm their inclusion into the annual workplan.
- To maintain a high level of public awareness, support and appreciation for Midpen and its mission, it is important to continue educating the public about the agency's purpose and complementary role in comparison to park agencies, adapting to new forms of communication and new styles of transmitting eye-catching and informative content, pursuing robust public engagement early during conceptual project phases and embedding DEI goals and objectives within policies and practices.
- Strategic investments in capacity and technology will further enhance Midpen's effectiveness and efficiency in delivering its mission. Ongoing training will ensure consistency in operations.
- Midpen's current and future actions to adjust the compensation philosophy and expand career ladders will enhance staff recruitment, retention and overall morale. Continued support of the internship program and holding the region's first recruitment faire focused on careers in land conservation/parks will also greatly support recruitment efforts.
- Continuity in establishing and nurturing relationships with Midpen's local, state and federal delegation is critical to fostering active external support for new initiatives, project approvals and grant funding. As Midpen expands its regional presence and leadership, maintaining strong champions at each level of government will also ensure incremental progress in meeting overarching land conservation, resource protection and access to nature goals.

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FY26 Strategic Plan Goals and Objectives

Goal 1 – Promote, establish, and implement a regional environmental protection vision with partners

Objective 1 – Continue implementation of the District’s Vision Plan and communicate progress on projects through reporting results and building partner relationships

Objective 2 – Build and strengthen diverse partnerships to implement a collaborative and science-based approach to regional environmental protection

Objective 3 – Take a leadership role in advocating for environmental protection goals by building and strengthening relationships with legislators and other elected officials

Objective 4 – Preserve and connect open space and agricultural lands of local and regional significance

Goal 2 – Protect the positive environmental and biodiversity values of open space and agricultural lands

Objective 1 – Take a regional leadership role in promoting the benefits of open space

Objective 2 – Protect and restore the natural environment and implement wildlife corridors to preserve healthy natural systems and biodiversity

Objective 3 – Lead by example to reduce the impacts of climate change: implement the Climate Action Plan to reduce operational emissions, expand regional landscape resiliency through partnerships, protect the capacity for long-term carbon storage of open space lands, and climate change adaptation strategies to protect viable populations of local native species

Objective 4 – Work with fire agencies and surrounding communities to strengthen the prevention of, preparation for and response to wildland fires for enhanced ecosystem resiliency and public safety

Objective 5 – Support the viability of sustainable agriculture and protect the character of rural communities

Goal 3 – Connect people to open space and agricultural lands, and a regional environmental protection vision

Objective 1 – Engage the public in realizing the benefits and responsibilities of a regional environmental protection vision to further the District’s achievements in protecting open space and agricultural lands

Objective 2 – Implement diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) strategies to build and strengthen partnerships, increase broad and inclusive public outreach and engagement, engage tribal groups in the District’s work, and instill DEI values across all levels of the organization

Objective 3 – Expand opportunities, including multimodal options, to equitably connect people to their public open space preserves and enhance the visitor experience in balance with the protection of natural resources

Objective 4 – Develop strategies to reflect the diverse communities we serve in the District’s visitors, staff, volunteers, and partners.

Goal 4 – Strengthen organizational capacity and long-term financial sustainability to fulfill the mission

Objective 1 – Provide the necessary resources, tools, training, staff facilities, and infrastructure, including technology upgrades, ~~and~~ capacity building and safeguards to address cybersecurity threats and future natural disasters

Objective 2 – Effectively and efficiently deliver Vision Plan projects and priority initiatives by implementing recommendations in the updated 2023 financial and operational sustainability model to guide operational growth and areas of focus, and facilitate project momentum

Objective 3 – Evaluate new initiatives against the District’s mission, strategic goals and objectives and internal capacity/workplan to confirm alignment and state of readiness Maintain a state of readiness for potential disruptions and leverage new resiliency practices and procedures to improve business operations, public participation, and communications

Objective 4 – Remain financially sustainable by preparing for, pursuing, and ensuring discretionary funding opportunities and partnerships

Objective 5 – Ensure large operational and capital expenses, including land acquisitions, associated public access and land management costs, are evaluated within the long-term financial model and remain financially sustainable

Objective 6 – Ensure the District remains competitive in the labor market and able to recruit, develop, and retain diverse and talented staff to implement the mission. Pursue opportunities to enhance professional development training and career ladders to strengthen our organizational capacity and succession planning efforts