



The Marin Headlands, Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA)

The Marin Headlands is part of the Golden Gate National Recreation Area (GGNRA), an urban national park that extends north of the Golden Gate Bridge to Tomales Bay in Marin County, and south to the San Mateo coast. The GGNRA was established on October 27, 1972, and included former U.S. Army lands within its boundaries.

The Marin Headlands area lies at the north end of the Golden Gate Bridge, across the bay from San Francisco. Together with Fort Baker, a 335-acre site directly adjacent to the parklands on the east side of U.S. 101, the Marin Headlands comprise a 2500-acre area. The Marin Headlands area has long been popular with bicyclists, hikers, and beach walkers.



The Marin Headlands. (Photo © Matt Tilghman)

The National Park Service was charged with preserving...”the recreation area, as far as possible, in its natural setting, and protect it from development and uses which would destroy the scenic beauty and natural character of the area.”

The Headlands cover various types of histories, from the Miwok Indians to the military, including historic Fort Barry and the NIKE missile site, Fort Cronkhite, and the 150-year-old Point Bonita lighthouse. Forts Baker, Barry, and Cronkhite are listed as a historic district on the National Register of Historic Places for its examples of military coastal fortifications and support facilities.

The 1980 General Management Plan for the GGNRA called for improving multi-modal transportation access to and within the park, considering a full range of alternative modes of transportation. This was echoed in the 1992 Statement for Management for Golden Gate National Recreation Area, which identified three management objectives for access and transportation:

- To provide alternative public transportation services as proposed in the General Management Plan;
- To alleviate traffic impacts on adjacent communities and on park resources by encouraging visitor and employee use of public transportation;
- To design and implement transportation plans to effectively manage the safe flow of traffic.

In June 2000, the NPS initiated a transportation management study to evaluate current transportation conditions in the Marin Headlands region. The purpose of the plan



Bulldozers reconfigure roadways and trails at Marin Headlands. (NPS photo.)

was to provide improved access to and within the Marin Headlands and Fort Baker for a variety of users, and to make these improvements in a way that would minimize impacts to the natural and cultural resources.

The study noted that since the transfer of the former U.S. Army lands to the NPS for inclusion in the GGNRA in the mid-70s, little of the road network had been rehabilitated. A 1999 survey of pavement conditions found only 12% of the paved roads in the study area to be in good condition.

In addition, many culverts and drain inlets in and under the roadways were undersized and prone to plugging with debris. Major road intersections had very limited sight distances and confusing alignments that had led to a number of accidents. The nature of existing trails, roadways, and parking areas had resulted in soil erosion, and runoff from these facilities in some cases impacted wetland or riparian habitats.

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“There was a lot of work to be done,” said Justin DeSantis, the regional transportation manager for the Pacific West Region, who worked on the Marin Headlands plan almost from its inception in 1999. “The roads were in pretty sad shape, with no shoulders and were generally either too wide or too narrow. There were spectacular overlooks, but parking areas were steep and crumbling.”

In addition, many roads had numerous blind curves and lacked shoulder space or bicycle lanes. Trails primarily followed former Army dirt roads and were steep and subject to severe soil erosion.

While there was public transit serving the Marin Headlands, the San Francisco Municipal Transit System (MUNI) ran this service only on Sundays and holidays. Golden Gate Transit (GGT) also provided daily bus service into the region, but stops generally lacked any amenities such as shelters, and the routes were not connected to any of the Marin Headlands’ primary attractions or facilities.

In creating the proposed plan for the Marin Headlands region, the NPS consulted nearly two dozen existing studies, and hosted three public scoping meetings, one each in San Francisco, Marin City, and Oakland. The resulting plan set three goals:

- Promote public transit, pedestrian, and bicycle travel to and within the park to improve the visitor experience and enhance environmental quality;
- Rehabilitate the Marin Headlands and Fort Baker road and trail infrastructure in a manner that protects resources and improves safety and circulation;
- Reduce traffic congestion and improve safety at key park locations and connecting roads.

A draft environmental impact statement was circulated for comment, and the Final Environmental Impact Statement (FEIS) was distributed in March 2009. That document analyzed four alternatives for transportation:



The Point Bonita lighthouse at the Marin Headlands, GGNRA
(Photo © P.L. Kappa)

Alternative 1) A no-action alternative, which provided for no change from the existing management direction other than implementing legislatively mandated requirements to protect natural and cultural resources within GGNRA, and to provide for visitor safety.

Alternative 2) This alternative provided for basic multi-modal access to the Marin Headlands and Fort Baker. Roadway infrastructure would be rehabilitated within the existing roadway width, parking facilities would be improved, transit service to the area would be expanded on weekends, and minor pedestrian and bicycle facility

infrastructure and management in the Marin Headlands and Fort Baker enhancements would be implemented to improve access to the park.

Alternative 3 (The Preferred Alternative) This alternative would provide enhanced multi-modal access to the Marin Headlands and Fort Baker. Roadway infrastructure would be rehabilitated or reconstructed without altering the historic character, and parking facilities would be improved. Additional transit options would be provided to and within the Marin Headlands and Fort Baker to improve access to the area. Pedestrian and bicycle access would be improved by constructing new trails and re-routing or closing several existing trails. New signage would be added to assist visitor wayfinding.

Alternative 4 This alternative would provide maximum multi-modal access to the Marin Headlands and Fort Baker. Roadway infrastructure would be reconstructed throughout the study area, and parking facilities would be improved. Transit options would be similar to those provided in Alternative 3 with the addition of connections to regional transit centers outside the park. More extensive pedestrian and bicycle facility enhancements would be implemented, including closing and rerouting existing trails, constructing new trails, and widening nearly all major roads to allow bicycle lane construction.

All of the alternatives in the FEIS called for at least basic improvements to roads and circulation improvements to alleviate congestion and reduce resource impacts. Parking management improvements included organizing and delineating parking areas, closing some parking areas, and relocating some parking to improve accessibility and safety.

The proposed Alternatives 3 and 4 included many improvements to transit services, increasing transit service levels and capacity, introducing a shuttle service into the park and more intermodal connections, and accessibility. These improvements were tied to projected revenue to be generated from parking fees that were outlined in these two alternatives.

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The FEIS also noted that universal design concepts that maximize accessibility for all visitors (including those with disabilities) would be applied to the greatest extent possible.

Following a comment period, the Record of Decision choosing the preferred alternative (Alternative 3) was signed on August 9, 2009.

Construction of most of the improvements called for in the Decision was completed in two sequential contracts, managed by the Lakewood, Colorado office of the Federal Lands Highway Division of the Federal Highway Administration. The reconstructed roadways now include bike lanes along key segments and formalized overlooks and trailheads that provide safe and universal access to key visitor activities such as viewing the city skyline across the Golden Gate and front-country hiking.

Severe erosion scarring left over from failing Army-era roadway drainage structures has been repaired and revegetated, improving the area's scenic qualities and providing habitat for several endangered species. Poorly sited or badly organized parking areas have been redesigned to provide safer and more convenient access to popular visitor destinations while protecting park resources.

Multi modal improvements also include construction of bus stops, shelters, and information kiosks, to better accommodate bus service from San Francisco, which now runs on both Saturdays and Sundays. Multi-use trail connections and improvements to the Rodeo Valley trail



Rodeo Beach at Marin Headlands (Photo © Srongkrod Kuakoon)

system, including two trail bridges, make it possible for equestrians, cyclists and hikers alike to enjoy access to this scenic area without competing for space on roadway shoulders.

“Today, most of the improvements called for in the proposed plans have been built,” said DeSantis. “I go out there on weekends and do hiking and bike trips. . .it’s nice to experience the Marin Headlands as a visitor sometimes.”