

## **CSAC Challenge Award Entry**

### **Community Partnership for Natural Resource Protection**

**Overview:** A Natural Resources Advisory Committee was formed to link community based resource experts with Santa Barbara County department staff to increase efficiency and effectiveness in protecting and expanding natural resource areas.

**Problem/Challenge:** No forum for proactive and productive dialogue between public and private sector experts on natural resource protection issues existed in 1999 in Santa Barbara County when 2<sup>nd</sup> District Supervisor Susan Rose formed the Natural Resources Advisory Committee (NRAC). NRAC's mission is to create a better way of doing business through a community-government partnership model. Natural resource protection by Santa Barbara County occurs in accordance with established policies and procedures, but is often triggered in reaction to or as mitigation for proposals that will impact natural systems. Oftentimes, inter-departmental and cross-jurisdictional communication is lacking early in project planning, design and implementation phases, resulting in resource protection often occurring as an afterthought, if at all. As a result of growing awareness of the interrelatedness of open space, water quality, habitat restoration and sustainable land use issues, the need for improved communication and action on County and community projects affecting sensitive resource areas was identified. In the past, County efforts were significantly underway before the public was informed and community or outside agency opposition or the emergence of new information caused project delays, cost over-runs, additional studies, and counter-productive relations with the public.

**Solution:** NRAC was formed to advise the 2<sup>nd</sup> District Supervisor and staff on County policies and practices using the best science available to promote collaborative and effective science-based solutions to local natural resource protection problems. NRAC includes staff from several County departments with land based operations (Parks, Public Works, Planning & Development, General Services), local scientists, staff from UC Santa Barbara, private sector environmental and planning professionals, and individuals representing community and environmental organizations. NRAC views natural resource areas proactively for their inherent value and potential for preservation or enhancement, rather than reactively when those resources face external threats. NRAC has improved public awareness and participation in natural resource conservation; has pursued greater understanding of the needs and functions of local watersheds; has served as a clearinghouse for restoration and sustainable resource management; has fostered collaborative partnerships among County agencies and between the County and other entities; has encouraged environmentally sensitive, ecologically-based management practices and training for County departments and employees; and has reviewed relevant policies on specific issues for consistency in order to guide decision-making. This approach resolved natural resource protection issues in a proactive and preventative manner. Tapping into community knowledge and resources offered a means of addressing complex issues constructively with the community, prevented costly errors, avoided conflict, and saved time throughout project development.

**Budget/Cost/Savings:** While no specific amount is budgeted for NRAC, staffing is provided by the 2<sup>nd</sup> District Office of Supervisor Susan Rose and most administrative costs are covered as part of routine office operations. Exceptions include consultation

costs of \$4,000 and *Inventory* document production costs of \$8,500. NRAC received grants and in-kind donations in excess of \$20,000 for various projects, including \$2,500 from designated County mitigation funds and \$2,500 from the Goleta Valley Land Trust. Grants brought into various County departments and community groups as a result of NRAC sponsored efforts amount to approximately \$90,000. Many of the projects described below would not have been accomplished without NRAC, which provided the vehicle for identifying projects and carrying them forward with partners.

**Results:** In line with the goals mentioned above and through grant writing, volunteer effort, and internal County funding sources, a variety of projects have resulted from NRAC's efforts. 1) An inventory of open spaces, organized by watershed, was conducted to assess the community resource values of 29 County-owned open spaces--mostly neighborhood pocket parks--focusing on the natural resources and other amenities they contain as well their potential for ecological enhancement, passive recreation, community stewardship, and enhanced management (see attached). 2) A grant from the Wetlands Recovery Project through NRAC allowed the County to acquire a small parcel of floodplain land with important habitat and recreational value along San Jose Creek. 3) NRAC facilitated the siting of a local genotype native plant nursery on County land for use by County department sponsored projects. 4) Two habitat restoration projects were commenced between 2000 and 2006: a) at Tabano Hollow, NRAC worked with County Parks and four partners, several community organizations, and volunteers from the community to restore a 2.5 acre degraded open space in a suburban neighborhood. Native plants were installed along a 1600-foot reach of San Antonio Creek, nearly doubling the width of a riparian habitat; b) the Foothill Open Space restoration project was completed in the fall with the help of neighborhood volunteers, County staff, Growing Solutions Native Plant Nursery, and hired contractors. Additional phases are currently in planning stages within other portions of the open space and are being restored as additional funding is secured. Photos of the restoration projects can be viewed at <http://www.countyofsb.org/susanrose/html/pictures.html>. Both projects involved invasive plant removal, passive recreation, and neighborhood stewardship components, and were funded by grant programs aimed at public-private partnerships.

Currently, NRAC is working to develop a policy proposal that would change County government's approach to water management and planning issues to a more comprehensive watershed perspective through researching the efforts of other counties in the state and through evaluation of existing collaborative watershed planning efforts within Santa Barbara County. New staffing to address these issues has been approved in the FY 2006-2007 budget as well as funding for enhancement of the open spaces mentioned above.

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***Optional Submission:*** See attached *2004 County Lands Inventory with Enhancement Opportunities* Executive Summary and CD.

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