



Is the New Devil's Slide Trail Safe?

[Summary](#) | [Background](#) | [Methodology](#) | [Discussion](#) | [Findings](#) | [Recommendations](#) | [Requests for Responses](#) | [Attachments](#) | [Responses](#)

SUMMARY

“Devil's Slide” is the name given to a steep, rocky coastal area on the San Mateo County coast located about midway between Montara and the Linda Mar District of Pacifica. In September 2012, in anticipation of the March 2013 opening of the Tom Lantos Tunnel -- which would bypass the Devil's Slide section of Highway 1 -- the County of San Mateo (County) Board of Supervisors (BOS) approved a one-time construction budget of \$1,991,525 for the creation of a trail for the recreational use of equestrians, cyclists, bird watchers, dog walkers and hikers.¹ In August 2013, the San Mateo County Parks and Recreation Commission (Commission)² approved plans for the creation of the Devil's Slide Trail (Trail). San Mateo County Parks Department (Parks) officials indicate the Trail will have an annual maintenance budget of \$220,823. In October 2013, the BOS approved the plans for construction. At that time no funds or plans were approved to repair the Trail from any damage which could be caused by major rock slides or for the acquisition of emergency phones. The 2013-2014 San Mateo County Grand Jury (Grand Jury) commends the County for its creation and development of the Trail, but has several recommendations intended to both maximize the Trail's use and enhance its safety.

- Research improving the emergency communication system currently available.
- Extend the current fencing to prohibit public access to Bunker Hill.
- Re-evaluate allowing horses on the Trail.

BACKGROUND

The bypassed (Devil's Slide) section of Highway 1 and seventy acres of State of California right-of-way became available for public access and non-motorized recreational use following the opening of the Tom Lantos Tunnel in March 2013. The now-closed section of Highway 1 has been converted into a section of the California Coastal Trail and is called the Devil's Slide Trail.

Parks was responsible for the re-construction and opening of the Trail and has been operating it since its opening on March 27, 2014. The Trail is a paved, multi-use trail that follows the coastline, using the now closed section of Highway 1, with 1.3 miles of scenic views.

¹ Appendix A: Devil's Slide Operations and Maintenance Plan One Time “Capital cost” Breakdown

² Acts in an advisory capacity in making policy recommendations to the Board of Supervisors regarding the management and operation of county natural preserves, marine reserves, open space areas, trails, parks and/or recreation areas and facilities within unincorporated San Mateo County. The commission is comprised of five members, one from each supervisorial district, and each must reside in the district for the length of his/her term. <http://www.smc-connect.org/organizations/parks-and-recreation-commission-of-san-mateo-county>

Improvements currently include multiple observation points, two unisex ADA-accessible toilets, park information kiosks, interpretive signage, trash and recycling receptacles, fencing and railing for visitor safety and protection, vehicle access barriers, drinking fountains, and mitigations to address environmental concerns. Caltrans has also completed parking areas at each end of the Trail on land that was deeded to the County.

The Trail is 26.5' wide, including two 6' wide lanes for bicyclists, a 12.5' wide surface for pedestrians, dogs and horses, and a 2' wide area on the west side for interpretative signs. The Trail is available at all times of the day, 365 days per year, but the parking lots are only open from 8:00 a.m. to 8:00 p.m. daily with two park rangers scheduled to be at the Trail during these hours. In addition to their other duties, the rangers are tasked with picking up litter and garbage from the Trail, cleaning ditches, keeping the Trail clear and maintaining the restrooms. As is true in many of the County's parks, there will be times when no ranger is present, according to Parks personnel interviewed by the Grand Jury.

Parks acknowledges that, as long as the Trail roadway (*i.e.*, the aforementioned bike and pedestrian lanes) remains intact, its plan for responding to a major rockslide is to remove any debris with existing equipment. There is a cabbed rock sweeper available for routine path maintenance. However, in the event the roadway is severely damaged and slides down towards the ocean, as has occurred numerous times since the construction of the original highway in 1937³ the County does not plan to repair the Trail roadway, which would instead be operated as two separate trails north and south of any such slide.

METHODOLOGY

- Reviewed Parks Commission minutes
- Reviewed Board of Supervisors minutes and resolutions
- Reviewed Devil's Slide Operations & Maintenance one time capital costs breakdown (Appendix A)
- Attended Devil's Slide Trail pre-opening event on 2/24/14
- Interviewed employees of the County's Parks and Recreation Department
- Interviewed a member of the Equestrian Trail Riders' Action Committee, an equestrian advocacy organization

DISCUSSION

It is widely anticipated that the Trail's extraordinary cliff views will draw many visitors. Because of its topography of sheer cliffs, however, the Trail presents several concerns with regard to the safety of visitors, especially children:

- Steep cliffs with rock slides are inherent to this area

³ [http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Devil's_Slide_\(California\)](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Devil's_Slide_(California))

- Proximity of the trail boundary to a partially unprotected cliff edge
- Lack of reliable phone service in case of an emergency

There is no emergency call box or reliable cellphone service on or near the Trail. Parks officials stated that consideration was given to the installation of an emergency call box during construction, but was rejected because the \$80,000 installation cost was prohibitive. The park rangers carry handheld shortwave radios. As noted, a ranger is scheduled to be on the trail daily between 8 a.m. and 8 p.m. However, if the ranger is called away to assist at another County park, the Trail will be unstaffed and there will be no emergency phone capability on the Trail. Additionally, cell phone reception is notoriously unreliable in this area. While taking a tour of the Trail on February 24, 2014, for example, none of the seven Grand Jury members present was able to obtain cell service on the majority of the Trail. Parks staff agreed that there is an issue with inconsistent cell phone service on the Trail.

Emergency medical response to a Trail incident falls under existing response plans of Cal Fire and the San Mateo County Sheriff's Office (SMCSO). This was confirmed by the SMCSO substation in Montara, which indicated that they would respond to emergencies on the Trail. Cal Fire also confirmed they would respond to both fire and rescue emergencies on the Trail. However, without reliable cell phone service or an emergency call box, and given the potential inconsistent presence of park rangers on site, it is unclear if an accident victim will be able to contact emergency agencies promptly.

During the course of its investigation, the Grand Jury reviewed various facts that raised questions regarding the decision to allow horses on the Trail. The Trail overlooks the Pacific Ocean, and is anticipated to experience many days of heavy fog resulting in a potentially wet and slippery paved surface for horses. According to an interview with a member of the Equestrian Trail Riders' Action Committee,⁴ an equestrian advocacy organization, this makes the Trail unsuitable for horses and increases the potential for accidents with other Trail users. This same interviewee further revealed that until the current trail is connected to existing horse trails east of Highway 1, the enjoyment value from riding the Trail will be limited. Equestrian use is further complicated as the Trail's parking lots do not adequately accommodate the typical truck and trailer horse rig or the loading and unloading of a horse. In light of the aforementioned factors, the Grand Jury believes that the Trail's use by equestrians should be reconsidered in light of the risk to hikers, bicyclists, and dog walkers; a risk which could be eliminated if equestrian use was prohibited.

Authorities anticipate that the Trail, as part of the California Coastal Trail, will be a popular destination not only with Bay Area residents but also with out-of-state visitors. Of particular interest in this area is Bunker Hill, a WWII gun emplacement, which is situated on the west side of the Trail and accessible by an old, unsafe, dirt, stairway lacking handrails and any maintenance. Until recently, the area has been used by local firefighting organizations as a fire spotter look-out. The area is now restricted and there is cautionary signage so indicating. The Grand Jury toured the Trail and, based on its observation, it believes that the current fence allows easy unauthorized access to the old staircase. Evidence of trespassing was noticeable to the

⁴ <https://www.facebook.com/pages/Equestrian-Trail-Riders-Action-Committee>

Grand Jury prior to the Trail’s official opening. Based on its observation of the Trail and discussion with Parks officials, the Grand Jury believes clearly indicate the current fencing does not prevent people from gaining access to the staircase.



View of current fencing designed to prevent access to Bunker Hill

Additionally, the cliff area adjacent to the fence has a guardrail -- as opposed to “K-rail”⁵ utilized on the majority of the Trail – which is large enough for children to crawl under it and fall down the cliff. Although originally designated for K-rail, park officials indicated that existing guardrail was used as a cost saving measure in this area.

⁵ K-rail is a modular concrete barrier employed to separate lanes of traffic. It is designed to minimize vehicle damage in cases of incidental contact while still preventing the crossover case of a head-on collision. K-rails are also used to reroute traffic and protect pedestrians during highway construction. http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Jersey_barrier 5/12/2014



Guardrailed section

The terrain directly west of the guardrail falls sharply downhill to the ocean. Adding a section of fence running north and south, beginning at the southwest end of the current fence (so as to prevent any restriction of the view) and ending at the interpretive center north of the guardrailed section, would both prevent access to the Bunker Hill staircase and help to prevent serious falling accidents in this area.



Current fence, guardrailed section and Bunker Hill staircase

FINDINGS

- F1. The Trail does not have an emergency call box and cell phone service on or near the Trail is unreliable.
- F2. At times, there will be no park ranger present to respond to an emergency on the Trail.
- F3. The Trail is not suitable for simultaneous mixed-use by horses, dogs and hikers.
- F4. Sections of the existing fencing inadequately prevent unauthorized access to Bunker Hill.
- F5. The guardrailed sections of the Trail do not prevent children from accessing the cliffs.

RECOMMENDATIONS

The San Mateo Grand Jury recommends that the San Mateo County Board of Supervisors direct the San Mateo Parks Department to:

- R1. By December 31, 2014, research improving the emergency communication system currently available.
- R2. By December 31, 2014, complete a study regarding the prohibition of horses on the Trail.
- R3. By December 31, 2014, extend the current fence to discourage future unauthorized entry to Bunker Hill.
- R4. By December 31, 2014, replace the existing guardrail and install K-Rail to reduce the risk of injury.

REQUEST FOR RESPONSES

Pursuant to Penal code section 933.05, the Grand Jury requests responses as follows:

- San Mateo County Board of Supervisors

Reports issued by the Civil Grand Jury do not identify individuals interviewed. Penal Code Section 929 requires that reports of the Grand Jury not contain the name of any person or facts leading to the identity of any person who provides information to the Civil Grand Jury.

APPENDIX

Devil's Slide Operations and Maintenance Plan
One-Time "Capital Costs" Breakdown

ITEM	Capital Structures	Capital Equipment	Other Start-up
Observation Desks/Raised Decks	\$300,000		
CXT Vault Toilets (2)	\$300,000		
Animal Proof Garbage Cans/Recycling Cans	\$15,000		
Cyclone Fencing with Gate at Gunner Site	\$8,000		
Cyclone Fencing 1.3 Miles 8-10' high	\$270,000		
Trail Access Control Gates and Bollards	\$42,000		
Security Keyed Locks			\$1,000
Benches and Tables		\$15,000	
Initial Painting of Pavement Markings	\$30,000		
4 Strand SS Cable 1.3 miles	\$210,000		
Signage and Kiosks	\$40,000		
K-Rail	\$58,125		
AED			\$2,500
Donation Boxes			\$5,000
Metal Out Building for Equipment	\$300,000		
Wheel Tractor		\$80,000	
Kubota ATV		\$16,000	
Medical Bed for Kabota			\$2,500
Trailer Pressure Washer w/Hot Water System		\$10,000	
Cabbed Sweeper		\$65,000	
Vehicle - 1/2 Ton P/U		\$45,000	
Back Pack Blowers (2), Electric Spades (2)			\$7,000
String Cutters (4), Blade cutters (2)			\$5,000
Plate Compactor			\$1,400
Airless Sprayer			\$1,800
Generator			\$2,700
Hand Tools/Drill Press/Saws			\$8,500
Paving and Crack Sealing (initial)		\$100,000	
Noxious Weed Removal			\$50,000
Total by Category	\$1,573,125	\$331,000	\$87,400
Total Operations and Maint Plan one-time costs	\$1,991,525		

Issued: July 8, 2014



COUNTY OF SAN MATEO
Inter-Departmental Correspondence
County Manager



Date: July 22, 2014
Board Meeting Date: Sept. 9, 2014
Special Notice / Hearing: None
Vote Required: Majority

To: Honorable Board of Supervisors

From: John L. Maltbie, County Manager

Subject: San Mateo County Parks – Response to 2013-14 Grand Jury Report “Is the New Devil’s Slide Trail Safe?”

RECOMMENDATION:

Approve the Board of Supervisors’ response to the Grand Jury report titled; “Is the New Devil’s Slide Trail Safe?”

BACKGROUND:

On July 8, 2014 the Civil Grand Jury filed a report titled: Is the New Devil’s Slide Trail Safe? The Board of Supervisors is required to submit comments on the findings and recommendations pertaining to the matters under control of the County of San Mateo within ninety days. The County’s response to the report is due to Hon. Lisa A. Novak no later than October 7, 2014.

Acceptance of this report contributes to the Shared Vision 2025 outcome of a Collaborative Community by ensuring that all Grand Jury findings and recommendations are thoroughly reviewed by the appropriate County departments and that, when appropriate, process improvements are made to enhance the quality and efficiency of services provided to the public and other agencies.

DISCUSSION:

Findings:

F1. The Trail does not have an emergency call box, and cell phone service on or near the trail is unreliable.

The County Board of Supervisors Response to F1: Agree.

(i) The County chose to explore cell phone service improvements rather than installation of a call box.

- (ii) On July 10, 2014, representatives of AT&T visited Devil's Slide Trail to determine feasibility of installing one or more additional cell phone tower. AT&T continues to work on a solution.

F2. At times, there will be no Park Ranger present to respond to an emergency on the Trail.

The County Board of Supervisors Response to F2: Agree.

This is a statement of fact. As a section of the California Coastal Trail, Devil's Slide Trail is open 24 hours a day, 365 days a year. The parking lots are open on the same schedule as all County Parks, which is 8:00 AM to 8:00 PM in the summer and reduced hours when days are shorter. Parks Rangers are present on the trail at times and always available on the radio. In addition, volunteer Trail Ambassadors patrol the trail and are often present on the trail when Park Rangers are working in other parks in the area. Volunteer Trail Ambassadors carry county radios for emergency contact.

F3. The Trail is not suitable for simultaneous mixed-use by horses, dogs and hikers.

The County Board of Supervisors Response to F3: Partially agree.

While County Parks originally was opposed to use of the trail by equestrians, this was a contentious issue. No horses have been observed on the trail to date. County Parks proposes to discourage horse use on the trail and will continue to monitor the issue.

F4. Sections of the existing fencing inadequately prevent unauthorized access to Bunker Hill.

The County Board of Supervisors response to F4: Partially agree.

Subsequent to the opening of the trail, County Parks contracted to have additional fencing placed on the north corner of Bunker Hill to prevent people swinging around the end of the fence, and additional cross-fencing was added. Moreover, additional warning and regulatory signs were placed at Bunker Hill.

F5. The guard-railed sections of the Trail do not prevent children from accessing the cliffs.

The County Board of Supervisors response to F5: Partially agree.

The existing guardrails are a common feature on trails and roads. In the case of Devil's Slide Trail, the task force considered a variety of factors in selecting barriers and fencing including: safety, cost, aesthetics, viewing areas, durability in the elements and visually screening people from birds nesting on rocks. A balance was struck among competing variables. All outdoor recreation settings present inherent risks which parents and others need to keep in mind.

Recommendations:

The Grand Jury recommends that the County's Board of Supervisors do the following:

R1. By December 31, 2014, research improving the emergency communication system currently available.

This recommendation is already underway.

R2. By December 31, 2014, complete a study regarding the prohibition of horses on the Trail.

Given funding priorities, the County elects not to do a study. Rather than prohibiting horses, equestrian use will not be recommended on Devil's Slide Trail and the trail will be signed as such (see bottom line in example photo). This will also be posted on the County Parks website.



R3. By December 31, 2014, extend the current fence to discourage future unauthorized entry to Bunker Hill.

While County Parks has already implemented this recommendation, staff will continue to look at options for improving the fence.

R4. By December 31, 2014, replace the existing guardrail and install K-rail to reduce the risk of injury.

Simply replacing guardrail with K-rail may not be the best alternative to reduce the risk while at the same time maintaining the aesthetics of the trail and view. By December 31, 2014, County Parks staff will determine the best options to meet multiple objectives for the trail and begin implementation to address the Grand Jury's concerns.

FISCAL IMPACT:

There is no Net County Cost associated with approving this report.