

Stakeholder Responses to a Survey on the June 2023 Trail Plan for Rio Vista Natural Resource Park, Tucson, Arizona

*Friends of Rio Vista
Rio Vista Conservation Project*

Report submitted to

Department of Parks and Recreation
City of Tucson
900 S. Randolph Way
Tucson, Arizona 85716

Report RVCP 23-02

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FRIENDS OF
RioVista



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INTRODUCTION

In March 2023, Tucson’s Mayor and Council approved the City of Tucson Department of Parks and Recreation’s (Tucson Parks and Recreation’s) master plan for Rio Vista Natural Resource Park. As part of the implementation of the master plan, Tucson Parks and Recreation has hired Watershed Management Group to propose a revision of the trail network. The consultants have drafted maps that suggest trails to be designated primary and secondary, rogue paths to close, modifications to trail surfaces, and construction for water harvesting.

Friends of Rio Vista, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the protection and enhancement of the ecological values of Rio Vista, is part of the informal steering committee that Tucson Parks and Recreation invited to review the trail plan and other components of master-plan implementation. With the approval of City staff, Friends of Rio Vista engaged other stakeholders, with diverse interests, to comment on the proposed trail system. This report presents the methods and results of that engagement, as well as recommendations based on the data gathered.

METHODS

Friends of Rio Vista created a survey consisting of 12 questions plus an open-ended comment field using the Google Forms platform. For each question, respondents could choose one or more options from the list of “answers.” In addition, one question included an “other” field where respondents could enter additional information.

These questions covered a range of issues that were designed to reveal how stakeholders use the trail system in Rio Vista Natural Resource Park and to identify their specific needs and preferences for the trail system.

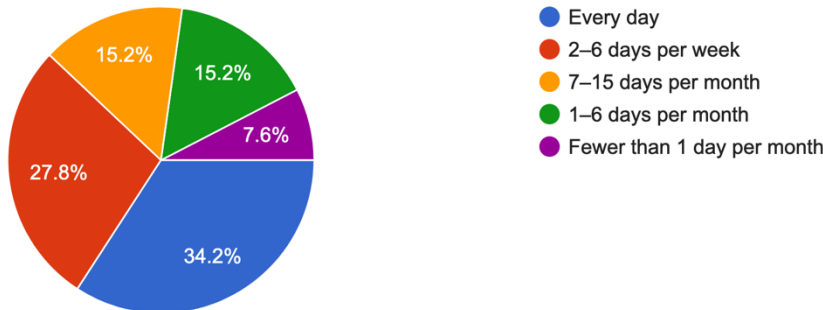
On July 20, 2023, we sent the survey to 270 stakeholder email addresses (note that some of these email addresses are shared by family members, so the actual number of recipients may exceed 270). We also sent out several reminders and published a link to the survey on our website, friendsofrio Vista.org. After 2 weeks (on August 2), we closed the survey. We received 79 responses.

QUESTIONS

Notes: Questions 1 and 2 captured respondents’ names and email addresses; they are omitted here. The number in parentheses following each question indicates how many responses were received.

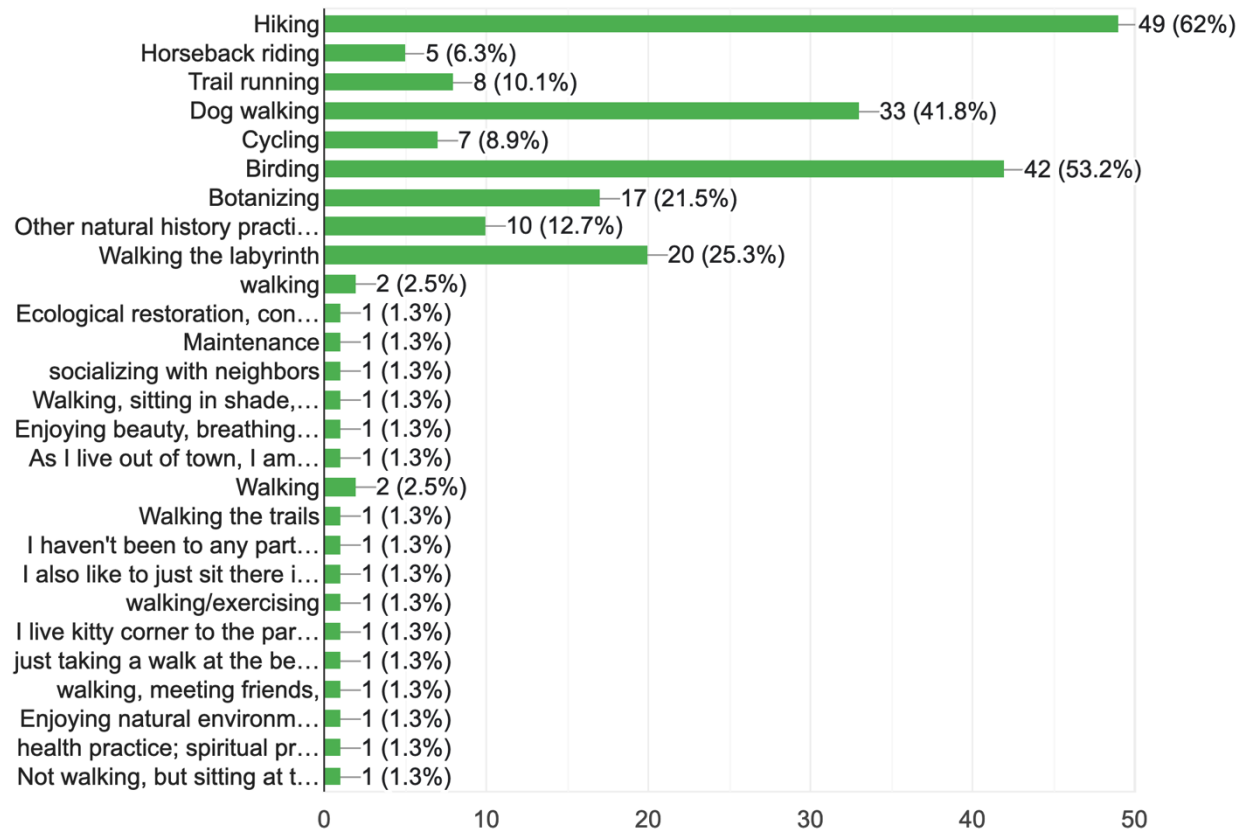
Q3: How often, on average, do you visit the natural area of the park? (79)

Most respondents (more than 60%) visit the park at least 2 days per week.



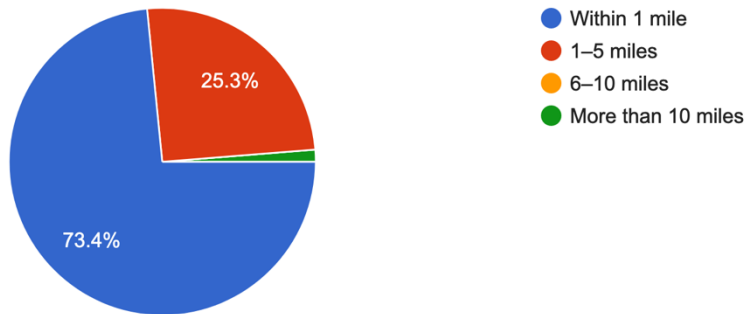
Q4: How do you use the natural area of the park? (79)

Hiking/walking, birding, and dog walking were reported as the most common uses of the park’s natural area. Note that respondents were also given the option of entering custom answers for this question.



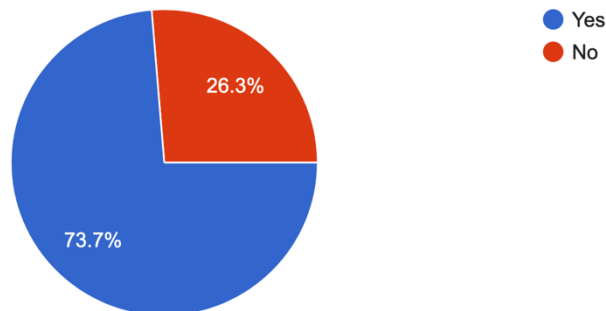
Q5: How far do you live from the park? (79)

Nearly all respondents reported that they live within 5 miles of the park. More than 73% live within 1 mile.



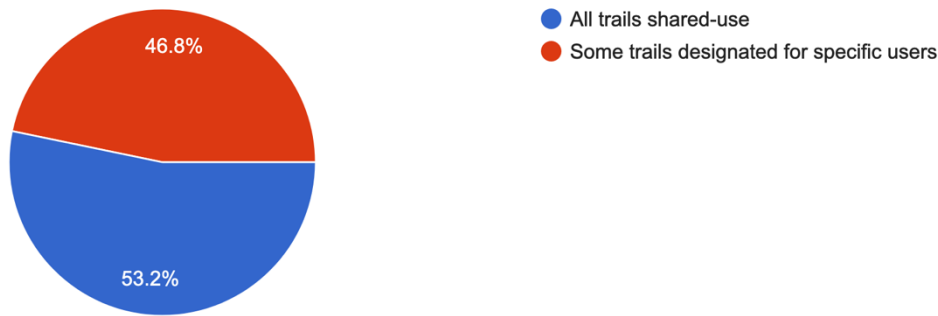
Q6: Do you think that trails should have spatial options for visitors (pedestrians, equestrians, cyclists) to pass each other safely? Examples: adequate trail width, alternate parallel paths for heavily used trail segments, pull-offs or lay-bys at tight spots. (76)

The majority (74%) of respondents favor implementing options for safe passing.



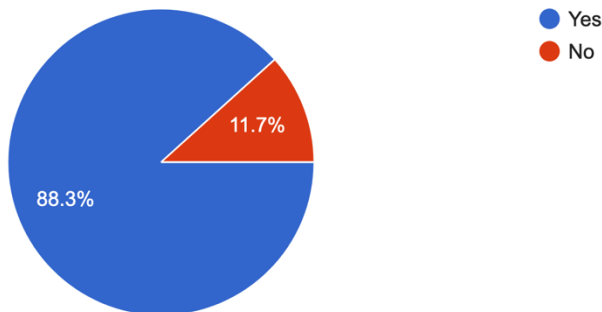
Q7: Do you think that all trails should be for shared use of all visitors, or do you favor designating some trails as equestrian only or pedestrian only? (77)

Respondents were split nearly evenly on whether some trails should be designated for specific users.



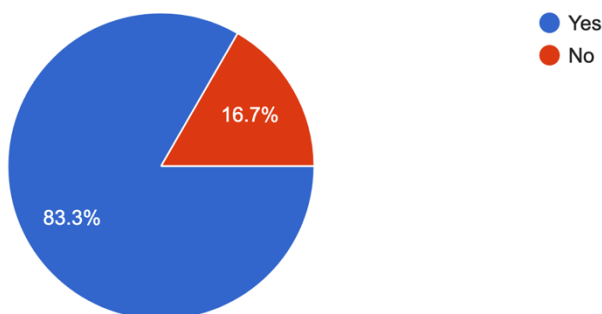
Q8: Do you support establishing a birding/wildlife-viewing loop that uses existing trails but adds short spurs to a few viewing locations in the most diverse habitats? (77)

A large majority (88%) of respondents support adding birding/wildlife-viewing options to existing trails.



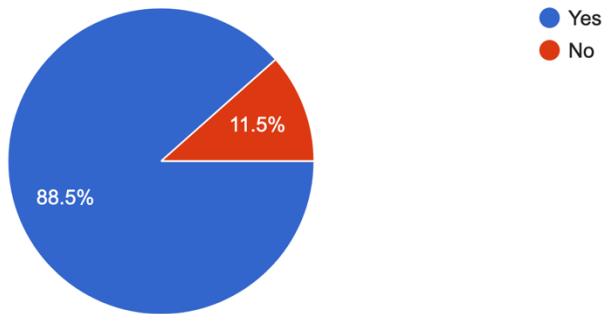
Q9: Do you support establishing an interpretive trail that follows existing paths but adds signage and other educational elements, in the developed area of the park (west side)? (78)

A large majority (83%) of respondents support adding interpretive elements to the west (developed) area of the park.



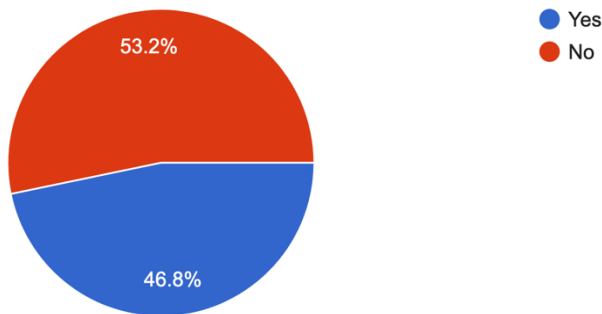
Q10: Do you think that Tucson Parks and Recreation vehicles should be restricted to the diagonal ADA path and the primary east–west trails from the middle and northern Cactus Boulevard entrances, when they are driven through the natural area for park maintenance? (78)

A large majority (88%) of respondents support restricting routes for Tucson Parks and Recreation vehicles



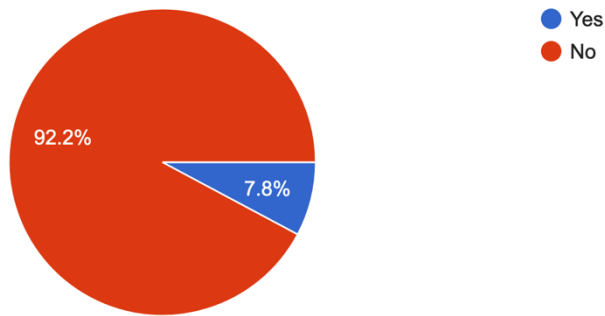
Q11: Do you think that trails should be named or numbered for easier wayfinding? (77)

Respondents were split on this issue; a slight majority favors no naming or numbering.



Q12: Do you think that Tucson Parks and Recreation should use glyphosate (Roundup) or other synthetic herbicides to control invasive plants in the park? (Note: Rio Vista was designated a pilot site for Organic First Tucson.) (77)

An overwhelming majority (92%) of respondents oppose the use of synthetic herbicides in the park.



ADDITIONAL COMMENTS

These comments are grouped roughly by topic; not all were directly related to the concepts covered in the 12 questions. Comments are presented verbatim with two exceptions. (These contributions were edited to remove identifying personal information.) In addition to these comments submitted by survey respondents, Friends of Rio Vista has sent detailed comments and questions on the trail plan to Tucson Parks and Recreation.

Signage

Signage should include precautions about approaching wildlife. Keep the infrastructure to a minimum. Plant more trees if it is possible to keep them watered.

While I am not able to answer your previous opinion questions since I have not visited the park, I am a supporter of urban spaces that protect and encourage wildlife habitation. In my experience, educational signage at appropriate locations is key to the enjoyment and learning of the public. Also, color-coding trails, rather than naming or numbering, might be an easier way to designate them. Color spots can be painted on wooden posts which can be easily installed, moved and maintained, and which have minimal visual distraction from other features. Children love color codes. This survey (and its online layout) is excellent! Keep up the great work!

I was not sure about some of my answers, for example, about having interpretive signs etc. I really want the park to be as natural as possible, but also to be accessible to all users. Not sure about the numbering of the trails. It does not seem that large of a park to warrant numbering the trails and having maps but there may be other users who may find it helpful. Also, having signs and maps requires maintenance or updating - they wear out or get damaged. Keep it simple and natural.

Names for the trails would be nice, and could be named after the birds that frequent the Park.

Enforcement issues

How do we keep people from wandering off path and injuring the vegetation? It looks like you have plans for rocks at intersections to try to keep people on paths but there may need to be more

of this along paths. Signage is good but often ignored. Many of the present difficulties come from inadequate supervision and maintenance. There is minimal presence of Parks and Rec or law enforcement at the park other than the crews who clean up who do a good job. Can we have gentle enforcement/education of people respecting the environment? Not just signs but people present to teach about our wonderful environment. I suspect there are local environmental, outdoor or wildlife organizations who could provide volunteers.

Concerns about off-leash dogs

My biggest concern is off-leash dogs in the park which I have personally witnessed an equestrian temporarily losing control of her horse, two healer dogs from nearby neighbor . . . chasing/squirming with coyotes. I also was bit by off-leash playful puppy from behind causing break in skin and need for antibiotics. I am a dog lover but it has gotten a bit out of control. Thanks for your dedication to this wonderful park we are lucky to live next door to for the past 18 years.

Dogs should not be allowed in the Natural Resources Park. Irresponsible dog owners allow dogs to run free and do not pick up feces. This is a daily occurrence. Though not a daily occurrence, I have observed dogs chasing coyotes, peccaries and disturbing nesting ground birds.

I noted 1-6 x per mo. for use of the park. It used to be at least that much or more. I had to stop altogether because of the frequency of encountering off-leash dogs with uncontrolled owners, which endangered me and my ALWAYS leashed dog on more than one occasion. I would love to be able to enjoy the park more, once again, if I was assured that off-leash dogs were actually being monitored and the Tucson leash law enforced. Beyond that, I support all intentions of the groups who seek to preserve the natural conditions of the park, and do not support further “development,” such as pool/splash-pad that would further destroy the natural aspects of Rio Vista NATURAL RESOURCE Park.

Spatial options for passing

I like the idea of having pull-offs along the trails to let others pass or just to sit and rest while out exercising the dog.

Equestrian and bike use

I think the plan for paths is good. I would not change any of it. More difficult will be maintenance and controlled use. I would encourage bikes and horses only on main trails due to erosive effects and crowding on secondary trails.

Is there some way to mitigate the horse trails cutting down into the top soil? I have been on some Tucson resort horse trails that have been cut 9 inches or more into the top soil.

All trails should be pedestrian, only some designated equestrian. Horse riders should be responsible for cleaning up horse feces.

I am not really comfortable with horses (big hoofs and teeth) so make their trails separate. Also, the riders should pick up their poop just like dog owners do.

The park should definitely restrict bicycles to paved areas of the park. Encountering them on the dirt trails while on horseback or while walking is not always an issue but it depends on the rider. Some are going too fast and y safely. This is not a mountain biking trail. In addition, signs should be posted for horse riders that require only walking through the park, no trotting or cantering.

I am not sure about the issue of shared trails, equestrian/pedestrian. I don't think there are enough trails to restrict their use to one or the other. The horses I have seen do not seem to be bothered by having people or dogs near to them. It might be possible to ask equestrians to ride specific trails as they traverse the park. I am presuming that riding in the park is not their goal, but that they are crossing the park to get to the river or another destination. Just speaking for myself, I always enjoy seeing the horses when I am there.

I am cautious when encountering horses, which are usually familiar with bikes.

Motorized bikes should NOT be allowed. Cyclist use of pathways needs be restricted (unless wide enough for multi-use access (such as the north-south paved path from Tsn. Blvd. to River Loop)). On all dirt or DG paths, wheeled transport usage needs be limited (or considered) after rains (which actually is only a handful of days during the year anyway). Especially re: cyclists (which for a number of reasons) are by far the most frequent impediment to safe & effective multi-use of pathways.

That activity of beyond walking can be fine in the park sponsored area that is very appreciated by us as horse owners. There should not be a locked gate to that arena area which has been the case in the past. Thanks for asking for opinions. I appreciate your work on these issues.

What about the "equestrian" area? And no to limiting trails or more area to equestrian use. Yes to limiting use of areas to pedestrians. An emerging problem is motorized vehicles, including e-bikes. These types of uses are transforming the loop and can harm the park. Efforts need to be taken to restrict the rarer but damaging effects of extreme uses of the area, including parks staff impacts.

Routes and designations for primary and secondary trails

As I am in favor of closing many of the side trails (alternate trails) that have developed, and some of the parallel trails, I hope this won't encourage people making alternate trails or short cuts. I will be glad to help in any way!

Please don't get rid of the secondary trails. Otherwise it's difficult to avoid heavily trafficked narrow paths.

Thank you for this opportunity. One quick comment I'd like to add is that we please terminate [the] secondary trail . . . that borders the [southern fence line of properties on the northeastern side of the park as well as the trail that borders these properties on] the west side. . . . These were

originally rogue trails anyway . . . [These trails are used by] trespassers . . . and some of those people are dangerous. Thank you again.

It appears that most of the minor, or “social” trails have been closed in this plan. I think this is good but for people who would like a quiet place to just sit and enjoy nature it would be nice to have a few smaller trails that lead to a bench, a place to sit and view birds or wildlife along the primary drainage area or with a nice view of the mountains. Traveling on trails are not the only way to enjoy the park.

I live on Cactus Boulevard, and I commute to work daily by bicycle across the park to my office at Campbell and Allen. I use the main East-West trail which is more than adequately wide to allow safe passage of multiple users.

Extremely curious as to what “ADA paths” mean--as those are the VAST majority of remaining trails. “ADA paths” requirement left us with the cement sidewalk network on the west side. While we didn’t like that development, it has turned out to be an appropriate, necessary, and well-used feature in the developed area of park. Would hope that ADA paths in all other areas of park DO NOT mean cement, or paved for that matter, paths. 2--Strongly believe that there need be extremely restrictive use of paths by ALL wheeled kinds of transport (except handicapped). Re: P&R vehicles, all maintenance should be done using Gators and NEVER large pickups with trailers.

The 4 separate revised trail maps are hard to read in fourths. I would prefer a trail from Zone 1 to Zone 4 that doesn’t redirect me to the southern most part of the grassy area.

Maintenance issues, including the use of herbicides

Do not use round up or other synthetic pesticides. The existing trees need to be taken care of, not overly pruned and kept hydrated.

I don’t know enough about glyphosate to be certain of answer. However, if it’s not organic, then the answer is “NO” as indicated.

Although many of us pick up trash when we’re walking, I think the Tucson Parks & Rec vehicles should be able to go to any trail that might need cleaning up. That is the explanation for the answer to my question about Parks & Rec having access to all trails.

Maintenance needs to have priority or all this will be wasted. There needs to be better watering of many plants and these systems need to be maintained. We recently had a water leak which was reported but ignored for a week. Plants seem to flourish for awhile with watering but then systems break and are not repaired.

Can we have an alternative to synthetic herbicides? Education and manual pulling? I have concern for the invertebrates and on up the food chain.

Last- please take care of the existing trees-making sure they are not over pruned and get water as needed.

I also wonder if parks and rec could provide an occasional roll-off and small front-loader to clean trash up out of the river. I clean up some trash, but sometimes it's a two hundred pound tire half buried in sand or a sand-filled mattress that I can't pull out...

can we get rid of some of the ugly dead trees? I know we want to keep it "natural" but it has walking paths so clearly it's not 100% natural. dead trees block some beautiful views of the mountains.

Birding/wildlife viewing

The primary drainage that runs west through the park from Cactus Blvd is one of the major birding features in the park. The proposed trail network only crosses this wash twice and allows little access for birders. Please consider adding an additional secondary trail that parallels the wash on the south side.

Keep things simple. No need to do an extensive study. No trail signs, no special birding areas (birds are all over the park). Not in favor of any disruption like widening trails.

The inclusion of additional "spurs" , as suggested in the questionnaire, are not needed, and will simply encourage the creation of new social trails in the future, add to park maintenance cost, and be disruptive to wildlife.

Trail surfaces

We enjoy taking almost daily walks thru the Park while we're in Tucson for the winter. I wear open-toed shoes (always), and wish the paths were limestone or some other type of small rock - or better yet, paved from one entrance to the other side (not all trails). I especially hate walking through horse "dirt". Paths should be wide enough to pass people without having to go single file.

Love the rogue trail closures. Not sure what the surface will be on the ADA trail? Otherwise everything looks great. Very exciting! Thank you

My hope is that the trails are not overdeveloped, please keep the natural quality of this landscape intact. I wonder about the use of DG, could gravel be used instead-it's heavier, perhaps then no stabilizer would be needed? Thanks for taking my comments into consideration.

Implementation/general

The current Park Plan prepared by Watershed Management Group and labeled "100% Draft" was well done and based on thoughtful input from a wide array of interested stakeholder, including nearby residents, equestrians, hikers, birders, restoration ecologists, to name just a few, and does

not need any further revisions. The Plan is fine as is. Furthermore, the planned primary, secondary, and closed trails should be accepted and constructed by COT Parks and Recreation. Please except the current plan without change, and let the City begin implantation without further delays.

The bond money is to be used for Parks & Connections. The drawings are very nice. We still need to remember to have a holistic vision. Plans should include areas along Cactus and Tucson Blvd as part of trails, restoration, and interpretive opportunities. Less is more, but we can focus on putting use in the areas where it is best suited. Let's not duplicate development in the interior if it exists or can be made adequate elsewhere. Part of protecting the most sensitive areas might be directing attention elsewhere, not actions such as adding "viewing spurs."

Other/miscellaneous

I wonder about creating an artificial watering hole for resident and transient animals.

I love the wildness of this park, which is a distinctive feature compared to other parks. People in our neighborhood are committed to maintaining a natural environment here. I also appreciate the attention to rainwater conservation in this plan.

I appreciate being able to give input. It will be nice to have usable trails that aren't messing up the environment

Short black and white polls covering a big broad subject are tough. Most of my answers could be more accurately answered with a "yes/no for the most part". Hopefully planners layout the park with appropriate fuzzy logic. Thank you for this input opportunity.

I was hopeful the glass recycling area would be moved to another park. It is very messy and loud. There just isn't enough room enough for glass in this tiny parking lot.

I know this seems weird, but I would love to have a tower near the dog park...one with steps or a spiral staircase for viewing the mountains and looking out over the park.

I applaud the establishment of a natural resources park and enjoy the birding, native plants and views of the mountains and sunsets. I wish there were more benches to meditate and rest and that the benches were artful. I would enjoy quality public art work in the park.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The strong stakeholder response (nearly one-third of those queried) to Friends of Rio Vista's online survey shows the devotion of visitors and neighbors to protecting the ecological values of Rio Vista Natural Resource Park. Respondents also made clear that the trail network should support the connection of human communities with nature.

On the basis of the data collected through the survey, we respectfully recommend the following to Tucson Parks and Recreation in revising the current draft of the trail plan:

- **Take into account the diverse groups of visitors and stakeholders.** Trail layout, design, and construction that accommodate their needs and behavior will encourage appropriate use of paths and will reduce damage to natural assets. Naturalists (especially birders) and equestrians are two important user groups whose concerns have not been adequately addressed in the current draft.
- **Build in spatial options for visitors to pass each safely.** Appropriate trail width, alternate parallel paths for heavily used trail segments, and pull-offs or lay-bys at tight spots all are possibilities.
- **Adopt the birding/wildlife-viewing and interpretive trail loops proposed by Tucson Audubon Society and other conservationists.** These will support the dual purpose of a natural resource park and are strongly favored by stakeholders.
- **Restrict access of Tucson Parks and Recreation vehicles** to the diagonal ADA path and the primary east–west trails from Cactus Boulevard to the westside developed area. Other trails in the park are not appropriate for trucks and other heavy vehicles.
- **Seek alternatives to glyphosate and other synthetic herbicides to control invasive plants in the park.** In 2019, Rio Vista was designated a pilot site for Organic First Tucson. At that time, Tucson Parks and Recreation made a commitment to stakeholders not to use these synthetic products in Rio Vista. Regardless of the current status of the Organic First Tucson program, nearly all stakeholder respondents are counting on the city to uphold this agreement. Their concerns are for the safety of both the human and the wild communities of the park.

Like other stakeholders in the future of Rio Vista Natural Resource Park, we are grateful to Tucson Parks and Recreation for their groundbreaking work in creating the park master plan. Changes to the trail network as part of master-plan implementation will have consequences for park visitors and the plants and animals living there for at least a human generation. We urge the department to continue its commitment to enhancing Rio Vista’s natural resources by taking park advocates’ comments into account.