

Planning Commission, Staff, & The Public,

In 2013, following community outreach, public meetings, and Planning Commission and City Council consideration, Sebastopol adopted the Ives Park Master Plan. The plan recognized the park as a shared public resource and sought to balance its many uses while improving accessibility, recreation, environmental sustainability, and the condition of Calder Creek. Creek restoration was not an incidental feature of that vision. It was one of the community's identified priorities.

Over the following years, that vision developed into a more specific restoration proposal. In 2022, after additional public consideration of alternative creek alignments, the City Council adopted the Calder Creek Vision Plan, amending the Ives Park Master Plan to incorporate a meandering, naturalized creek. That decision reflected more than a preference for how the park should look. The selected alignment considered engineering constraints, creek stability, mature trees, existing infrastructure, recreational uses, and the relationship between the creek and surrounding public spaces. Since then, implementation has proceeded slowly. Funding has not been secured, and the project remains short of final construction. But delays in implementation do not erase the decisions made through the planning process. The adopted vision remains part of the city's framework for future improvements.

In 2025, the Rotary Club of Sebastopol submitted plans for improvements to Ives Park in recognition of its centennial. The project includes replacing the Polley Field concession stand, improving restroom facilities, creating an accessible entrance from Jewell Avenue, and establishing a new gathering space identified as the Rotary Centennial Plaza. These improvements have understandable public benefits, particularly the accessibility and restroom upgrades. Rotary also has a longstanding history of contributing to community amenities. However, one portion of this proposal presents a fundamental conflict with the city's adopted plans. The Planning Commission staff report explicitly acknowledges that the proposed Centennial Plaza occupies an area identified for the restored creek alignment and that the project, as designed, conflicts with the adopted Calder Creek Vision Plan.

This is not simply a concern raised by opponents of the project. It is a finding acknowledged by city staff. The report also documents that the Commission previously recognized this conflict, that a subcommittee was formed to facilitate discussions between Rotary and the California Urban Streams Partnership, and that those discussions did not produce an agreed-upon design. Rotary subsequently chose to proceed with its proposal as presented. Staff now explain that approval would require amending the Calder Creek Vision Plan to accommodate a different creek alignment. This raises a question that extends beyond the merits of either individual project: What is the value of an adopted public planning process if a subsequent privately funded proposal can effectively determine that the public plan must change?

I do not believe private organizations should be discouraged from investing in our community. Quite the opposite. Their generosity and initiative can make improvements possible that might otherwise remain unfunded for years. But there is an important distinction between private organizations helping implement the community's adopted priorities and private organizations proposing projects that require those priorities to be reconsidered.

The ability to fund a project should not, by itself, confer greater influence over the use of public land or the direction of public planning. The concern here is not necessarily that Rotary has intentionally attempted to circumvent a required process. The concern is that the city may be creating a pathway through which a privately funded project receives consideration on its own terms, while an earlier publicly adopted project is subsequently expected to adapt. That distinction matters.

The 2022 restoration alignment emerged from a public process that considered alternatives and competing needs. If the city now intends to change that alignment, the public should have an opportunity to understand why the previous decisions no longer apply, what consequences the change would have, and whether the alternatives have received comparable scrutiny. Otherwise, the sequence risks becoming one in which an alternative is effectively selected before the public has fully considered the implications of departing from the adopted plan. The question is not whether the city may amend its plans. Of course it may. Plans must remain responsive to changing conditions and opportunities. The question is whether the decision to amend the plan should precede, rather than follow from, a commitment to a conflicting project.

That is particularly important when the two projects are not necessarily mutually exclusive in their entirety. The accessibility improvements, restroom upgrades, and concession replacement appear to offer benefits that can be considered separately from the proposed plaza. The staff report identifies the plaza as the component inconsistent with the adopted creek alignment. The Commission therefore has an opportunity to examine the proposal with greater precision rather than treating it as an all-or-nothing decision.

Before forwarding a recommendation to City Council, I hope the Commission will address the following questions:

1. **What process governs reconsideration of the 2022 Calder Creek Vision Plan?** If approval of the Rotary Plaza requires changing that adopted plan, when and how will the public be invited to consider the proposed amendment and its alternatives?
2. **What independent technical evaluation supports changing the creek alignment?** Has the city established that a revised alignment would preserve the hydraulic capacity, long-term channel stability, ecological benefits, infrastructure protections, and usable public space considered in the original design?
3. **Has the city evaluated the consequences for future restoration funding?** Could changing the alignment affect project costs, engineering work already completed, eligibility for grants, or the competitiveness of future restoration proposals?
4. **Why must the Commission consider the project as a whole?** Can the concession stand, restroom, and accessibility improvements proceed independently while the conflicting plaza component receives additional review?
5. **How does the city distinguish private financial opportunity from public planning priority?** What safeguards ensure that a project's readiness or available private funding does not become the determining factor in changing an adopted public plan?
6. **What will the public be told about the decision?** If the city ultimately departs from the 2022 vision, how will it explain which public concerns, prior findings, and technical considerations informed that choice?

Sebastopol has invested substantial community time, professional expertise, and public deliberation in planning the future of Ives Park. That investment deserves meaningful consideration even when implementation takes longer than anticipated. The city can recognize Rotary's contributions, pursue needed improvements, and remain open to new ideas without treating an adopted public plan as an obstacle to be adjusted around a newly funded proposal.

Ultimately, I hope the Commission will focus not only on what improvements can be built today, but also on how today's decisions honor, or deliberately reconsider the public decisions that brought us here. The public deserves to understand not just what is decided, but why, and how its participation has shaped the outcome.