Santa Cruz Riverwalk Usage Study Report:
Two-Year Analysis of Findings

Prepared by:

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Introduction

The Santa Cruz Riverwalk is the City of Santa Cruz’s longest park, extending nearly two miles on either side of the San Lorenzo River from the Highway 1 bridge to the river mouth next to the Santa Cruz Beach Boardwalk. The area, formerly known as the San Lorenzo Riverway, was re-designated as a city park and named the Santa Cruz Riverwalk in 2013.

The Riverwalk offers a variety of uses and experiences for locals and tourists alike: a thoroughfare used by pedestrians and bike commuters, a respite for reflection along the banks of the San Lorenzo River and a green space to reconnect with nature on your lunch break. Yet the Riverwalk remains mired by negative public perception and considered by some a place to be avoided due to visible homelessness and drug use.

The Santa Cruz Riverwalk Usage Study is a parks survey that establishes data on who visits the Santa Cruz Riverwalk and how visitors use the open space and trails. Parks usage surveys like this one are conducted to help parks better serve communities. The Riverwalk Usage Survey can also measure the impact of infrastructure improvements and community engagement and events in the park.

This report shares findings from the two-year study period from August 2014 to July 2016 of this ongoing study by Coastal Watershed Council staff and volunteers. This is the first of its kind park usage study for the City’s longest park and presents a range of data to better understand the function of this arterial and unique urban park along the banks of the San Lorenzo River.

Methods

Several types of park usage study methodologies were reviewed before selecting an observational non-contact count method for the Riverwalk Usage Study. Park usage measuring techniques were inspired by methods used nationwide and established with the help of Civinomics, a local data analysis start-up, and reviewed by a volunteer from Applied Survey Research, a social research firm.

Starting August 2014, volunteers collected data Thursdays, Saturdays, and Sundays, from 12:00 to 12:30p.m. Volunteers collected data from one of three Riverwalk access points: Highway 1 pedestrian bridge (Riverine Reach), Duck Pond at San Lorenzo Park (Transitional Reach) and the Trestle Bridge (Estuarine Reach). At each location, recording Riverwalk visitors in a standard form and surveys were conducted surveys rain or shine.

Over the past two years a total of 25 volunteers compiled 184 independent surveys. Volunteers were trained to count the number of visitors to the park, document their chosen recreational activities, mode of transportation, and demographic data.

Riverwalk usage was categorized using the following activities:

- **Biking** – Those biking on the Riverwalk whether they are recreationally biking or commuting.
- **Walking** – Those who are walking on the Riverwalk. This group does not include those walking with dogs.
- **Dog Walking** – Those taking their dog for a walk or playing at the dog park.
- **Running** – Those who are running or jogging on the Riverwalk.
- **Patrolling** – Santa Cruz Police Department, Parks Department or other staff in uniform, patrolling the Riverwalk for public safety purposes.
• **Working** – City of Santa Cruz Water Dept. staff, Parks and Recreation staff and other workers who are at the Riverwalk engaged in an activity related to their employment. Public safety officers are not included in this group, but rather in the ‘Patrolling’ activity group.

• **Observing** – Those who are enjoying and watching the outdoor space of the Riverwalk. Examples include: Birdwatchers, photographers.

• **Skating** – Those who are skateboarding or roller-skating on the Riverwalk.

• **Volunteering** – Those who are stewarding the river by participating in clean ups or another activity to care for the Riverwalk.

• **Touring** – Those who are on tours or other educational walks.

• **Paddling** – Those counted in the River on kayaks, canoes, SUPs or other watercraft.

• **Disc Golfing** – Those playing disc golf in San Lorenzo Park.

• **Relaxing** – Those who are relaxing by the river. Examples include: having a picnic, sitting by the river, reading, etc.

• **Camping** – Those who are sleeping by the river with backpacks or other gear.

• **Drinking / Drug Use** – Those who are drinking or using drugs by the river.

• **Playing** – Those who are playing in or near the river. This includes the playground at San Lorenzo Park and those splashing in the water at the river mouth.

• **Other** – Volunteers were advised to use this category as little as possible, ideally grouping the activity into one of the above. If it simply does not fit, it was recorded as other.

In the study, activities that contribute to making the Riverwalk a safe and welcoming recreational area, such as playing, skateboarding, biking and dog walking, are defined as positive activities. Camping, drinking and drug use are excluded from this definition.

**Results and Discussion**

The following tables and graphs compare the findings of 126 usage surveys of the Santa Cruz Riverwalk from August 2015 through July 2016 and to the baseline study from August 2014 to July 2015.

In the two years a total of 14,892 people were observed. During the year-long baseline study from August 2014 to July 2015, 90 people were observed on average per survey. In the second year study period from August 2015 to July 2016, 77 people were observed on average per survey. Over the past two years, a total of 14,396 people or 96% were counted participating in positive activities. A total of 496 people or 4% were seen partaking in camping, drinking and drug use.

**Activities**

The most frequently observed activities on the Riverwalk are walking and biking, indicating that people use the Riverwalk primarily as a route to access different destinations in the City or as part of a workout regimen. Commuting and exercise-related activities were also most popular in the 2014-15 baseline study and continue to be so in the 2015-16 study.
Of all of the activity observed at the Riverwalk in the 2015-16 study, the majority was positive. Over the course of the 2015-16 study, 51% of all observed usage was walking while 32% of all observed usage was biking. From the baseline study to the second year, the average number of people walking per survey decreased from 48.2 per survey to 39.5. Meanwhile, the average number of people biking per survey increased from 23.4 people to 24.7.

An average of 1.6 people per survey was observed camping in the 2015-16 study.

Of the total people observed at annually the percentage of campers decreased from the baseline study by 0.6%. Of the total campers observed at the Santa Cruz Riverwalk at noon, 62% were male, 33% were groups of men and women together and only 3.6% were women.

**Day of the Week**

Volunteers collected data on Thursdays, Saturdays and Sundays throughout the year demonstrating variations in park usership and individual behavior based on work and leisure time.

Over the past two years, 75 surveys were conducted on weekdays and 109 surveys were conducted on weekends. There was a significant difference between the average number of people observed per survey on weekends and weekdays. In 2014-15 the average number of people observed per survey was 89.7 on weekends and 90.3 on weekdays.

During the 2015-16 study period the average people per survey was 72 on weekends and 83.2 on weekdays, indicating as usership declined overall in 2015-16 it did more so during weekends.
Seasons

Outcomes of the baseline study did not indicate significant variation in usage based on seasonality. Analysis of 2015-16 Riverwalk usage by season suggested trends in park usership, and specifically observed positive activity, may be correlated with weather and seasonal behavior. In the fall months of the study period (September, October, November 2015) average usage was 118 people per survey doing positive activity. In the winter (December 2015, January and February 2016) there was an average of 66 people observed per survey in positive activity. Spring (March, April, May 2016) saw a slight increase of 69 people per survey. In summer months (August 2015, June and July 2016) an average of 101 people per survey were documented partaking in positive activity.

![Average Number of People Per Survey Observed in Positive Activity Seasonal Comparison](image)

The sharp dip during in winter and fall months of the 2015-16 study may be attributable to it being an average rainfall year. While volunteers collected usership data rain or shine, visitors to the Riverwalk were more deterred by the weather.

In contrast, the 2014-15 study coincided with drought-year conditions. Little to no precipitation during survey collection could explain the low variation in average number of users per season. Only one survey in the baseline study was collected while it was raining. During the 2015-16 study 12 surveys were during rain or immediately after.

Demographic Attributes

During each survey, volunteers recorded the approximate observed age and the observed gender of the visitors to the Santa Cruz Riverwalk. Year over year there has been little to no variation in the gender of visitors on the Riverwalk. Male visitors alone or in groups make up 45% of visitors to the Santa Cruz Riverwalk, while female visitors alone or in groups account for 19% of visitors. Compared to previous year’s data there was notably no change in proportion of male or female users.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Observed Gender</th>
<th>% of Visitors Observed</th>
<th>2014-15</th>
<th>2015-16</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td>45%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td>19%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mixed (for Groups)</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>33%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Uncategorized</td>
<td>1%</td>
<td>2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
In contrast the age groups seen at the Riverwalk have changed considerably between the two years of study. Adults in their 30’s continue to be the most commonly observed age group at the Riverwalk. The percentage of families, defined as groups of adults with children younger than 20, has decreased by 5%.

In the past year, we have observed an increase in seniors visiting the Riverwalk from 3 to 4%. The Santa Cruz Riverwalk senior usage is now consistent with the national average of seniors observed in park usership studies. Challenges in identifying age during the 2015-16 survey left the ages of 13% of individuals observed at the Riverwalk uncategorized.

Summary

The Coastal Watershed Council (CWC) is committed to reconnecting a healthy San Lorenzo River watershed to a vibrant community. CWC continues its focus on improving water quality, generating a more consistent and positive image of the river and increasing positive activity along the San Lorenzo. CWC is tracking these three objectives in terms of the following metrics: river health, river press, and river revelers (visitors to the river, such as those observed in this study).

In order to increase river revelers along the Santa Cruz Riverwalk, CWC, the City and partners are modeling positive park usage through events and installing park amenities and infrastructure. Recent installment of lighting features and workout equipment on the Santa Cruz Riverwalk are among these improvements that make the Riverwalk safer and more inviting.

CWC set a goal of a 30% increase in river revelers, including joggers, walkers, bikers, picnickers, families and paddlers to the river by 2016. Yet, rather than an increase, study outcomes showed an 18% decrease in Riverwalk usage from the baseline study to year two. This may be attributable to changes of weather patterns from one study period to the next and it is important that we continue collecting Riverwalk usage data to glean long term trends from weather related or seasonal fluctuations.

The Riverwalk Usage Study is an important tool to measure the impact of collaborative work done to improve community engagement with the Santa Cruz Riverwalk and the San Lorenzo River. CWC, with the help of dedicated volunteers, will continue to measure these milestones in fostering a space for all Santa Cruzans at this beautiful riverfront park.