

Panama Flats – Concept Plan Update

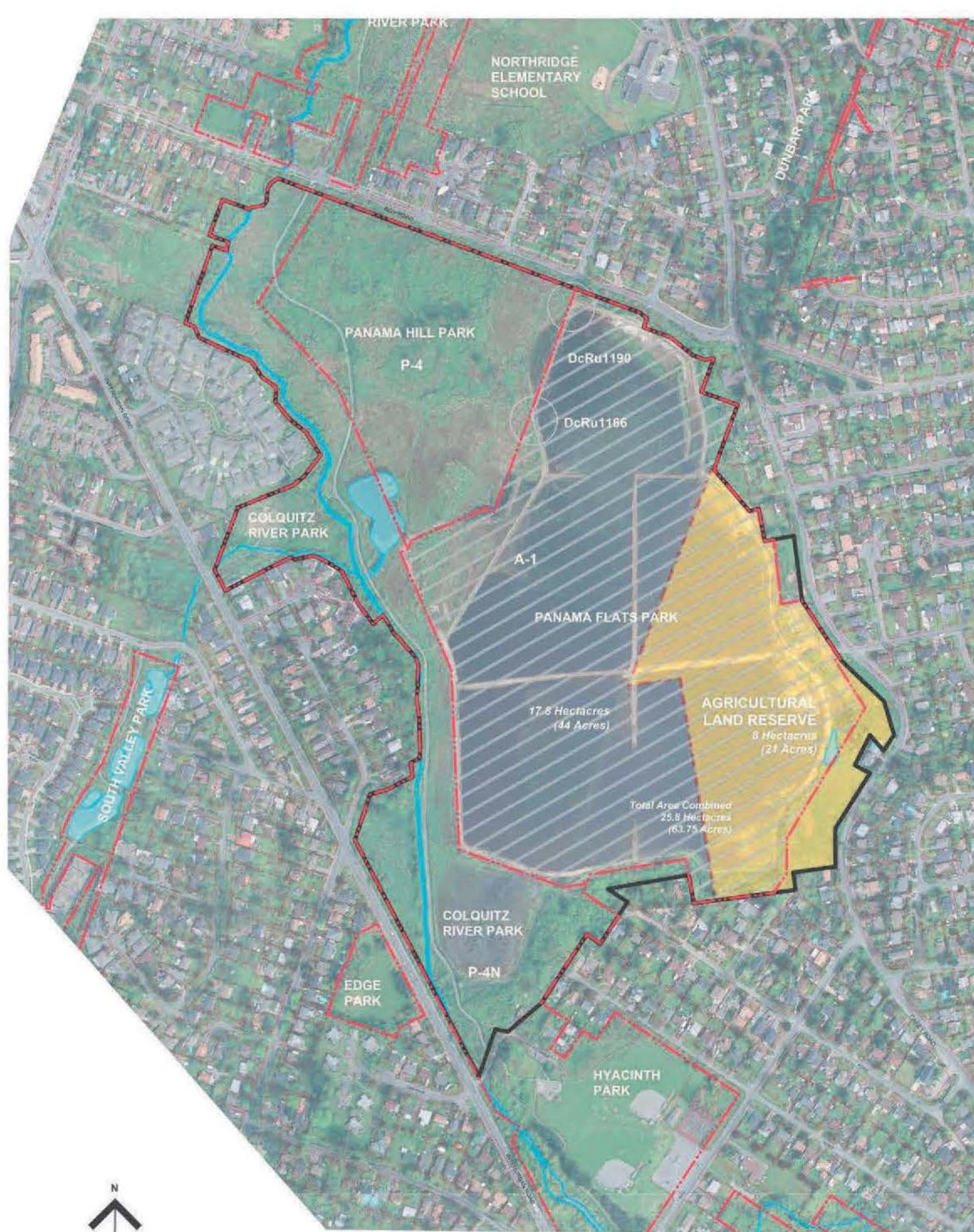
Saanich Purchase

The original landscape of Panama Flats has been transformed since colonization, and the flats had been actively farmed for decades prior to their purchase by Saanich in 2011.

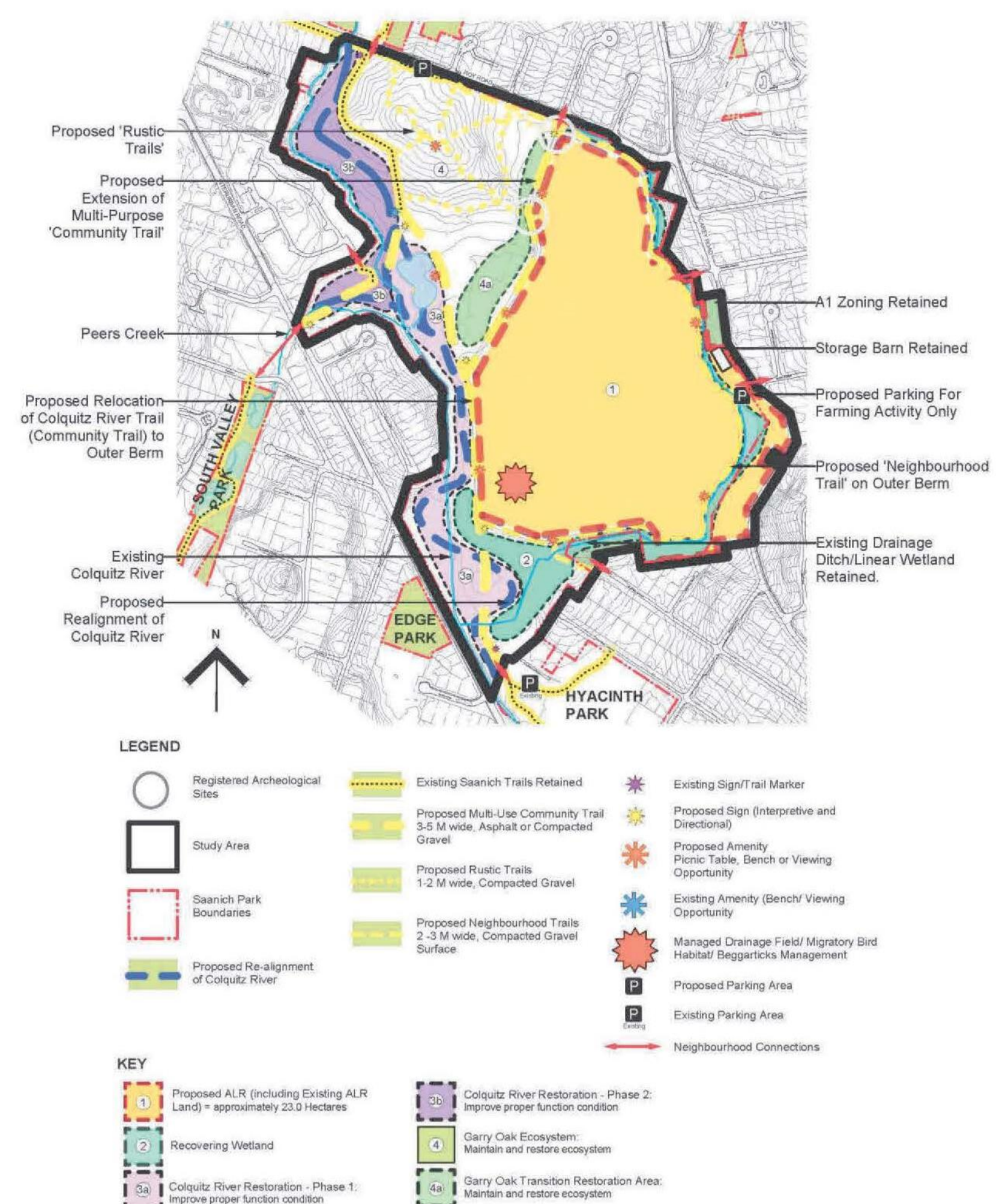
Saanich developed a Concept Plan in 2014 to reflect its interest in the property:

- Increase land in the Agricultural Land Reserve (ALR), and improve for farming,
- Protect bird and rare plant habitat,
- Create new trails,
- Improve the Colquitz River for fish,
- Restore Garry Oak ecosystems,
- Maintain floodplain storage.

Panama Flats Concept Plan, 2014



2014 Context Plan



2014 Concept Plan

The entire 2014 Panama Flats Concept Plan is available for viewing at this event.

Since 2014 Concept Plan:

- Saanich applied to include more of the flats in the ALR and was unsuccessful, and the idea of large-scale farming is no longer being considered,
- The property has remained unfarmed, and is managed to control invasive plants, and protect at-risk plant species,
- It is managed for stormwater management function and odour control.

Panama Flats – Background

Council Direction

In 2023 Saanich Council directed staff to update the 2014 Panama Flats Concept Plan. Other than large-scale agriculture, the 2014 Plan remains largely relevant.

The Updated Plan will reflect the community’s current values and use of Panama Flats within the context of the 2014 Plan.

Specific topics that were explored are:

- **First Nations** – Panama Flats was part of the rich natural landscape that supported First Nations people for thousands of years. Can culturally important areas and traditional uses be incorporated?
- **Biodiversity and Conservation** – How will fish habitat, wildlife and rare plant habitat be protected?
- **Stormwater Management** – The flats’ role in Stormwater Management must continue.
- **Recreational Opportunities** – How does the community use the area, and how can they be accommodated in balance with other important aspects?
- **Small-Scale Agriculture** – Are there localized opportunities for small-scale farming?

Flat Facts

Note that for the purpose of this planning process, ‘Panama Flats’ refers to Colquitz Park between Hyacinth Avenue and Roy Road, Panama Hill Park, and the area commonly referred to as panama flats. Together, they total 48.6 ha (120 acres), the flats themselves are 26.3 ha (65 acres) in size.

- ★ The variety of ecosystems and seasonal habitat types that make up Panama Flats support abundant and varied bird species, and Panama Flats are widely celebrated as a world-class bird watching destination by the naturalist community. Sandhill cranes, ring-necked pheasants, loons and golden eagles are among the 228 confirmed bird species here.
- ★ Informal trails that can damage soils and vegetation have developed over the years. Bare soil helps invasive plants to spread, and English hawthorn and reed canary grass are particularly problematic here.
- ★ Salmon have been seen in the Colquitz River within the boundary of Panama Flats, and a large dead salmon was found on the flats - evidence that they may enter the flooded fields in winter.
- ★ Beavers have recently returned to this section of the river, you can see evidence of this on the large cottonwood trees at the south end of the Colquitz River Trail.

Panama Flats – Community Engagement

Dogs at Panama Flats

Dogs are an important part of visiting parks. At many parks, including Hyacinth Park (immediately south of Panama Flats), dogs are welcome off-leash (if under control) at any time. Hyacinth Park will soon also have a year-round fenced off-leash dog area.

Dogs are currently permitted off-leash on the Colquitz River Trail, Panama Hill and Panama Flats from 6am to 9 pm daily.

Birds at Panama Flats

Minimizing disturbance along the edge of the shallow winter lake and other bird habitat in and around the central fields is critical to ensure that birds continue to thrive. ‘Quiet’ areas with no trails are important to birds. These areas allow birds to cease monitoring trail traffic for signs of potential threat, and concentrate on nesting, resting and feeding.

Community Engagement

Parks staff have had conversations with representatives of:

- **Community Associations** – (Cary Area Residents’ Association, Royal Oak Community Association and Mount View Colquitz Community Association),
- **Recreation-Related Groups** – walking (Saanich recreational walking groups, Pathfinders, Silver Threads) dog-walking (CRD DOGG Society), and cycling (Capital Bikes),
- **Environmental-Related Groups** – (Greater Victoria Naturehood, Ducks Unlimited, Victoria Natural History Society, Habitat Acquisition Trust, Peninsula Streams and Shorelines Society, Salmon in the City, and Colquitz Coalition),
- **Agriculture-Related Groups** – (Capital Region Food and Agriculture Initiatives Roundtable, and Peninsula & Area Agricultural Commission),
- **Saanich** – Various Saanich staff groups including Natural Areas, Urban Forestry and Engineering.

Staff have also invited the Songhees and Esquimalt Nations and the WSÁNEĆ Leadership Council to engage on the plan.



Panama Flats – Vision & Goals

Saanich staff have reflected the collective input from the community groups in a Vision Statement, and have created a series of Goals and Actions to realize it:

Vision

Panama Flats is a space that the community treasures for its benefit to both nature and people. Its rich habitat is protected and supports a variety of wildlife, particularly an abundance of birds. It is a popular neighbourhood destination that helps to build community based on a common understanding and respect that unites all visitors, regardless of their interests.

Goal 1: Accommodate Passive and Active Recreation

Actions:

- Build an appropriate trail system for walkers, runners, dog-walkers and cyclists,
- Create bird watching opportunities (viewpoints, bird blinds),
- Formalize dogs off-leash area.

Goal 2: Ensure The Preservation and Enhancement of Ecosystems

Actions:

- Maintain migratory bird habitat (open shallow water),
- Formalize disturbance-free area for wildlife,
- Improve the Colquitz River and its riparian zone,
- Where necessary control access to protect sensitive ecosystem features,
- Maintain and enhance the Garry oak ecosystem on Panama Hill,
- Refine trail system, close rogue trails and restore damaged areas.

Goal 3: Build Community

Actions:

- Create a gathering space and nature education hub,
- Build community gardens in Colquitz Park north of Roy Road (if sufficient interest and a group to manage it).

Goal 4: Park Interpretation and Education

Actions:

- Install interpretive signage about Panama Flat's natural features (river, ecosystems and habitat types) and its importance to wildlife,
- Create opportunities for bird-watching (viewpoints, bird blinds) and nature appreciation,
- Work with the indigenous community to share knowledge,
- Clearly indicate the trail system with minimal signs and markers.

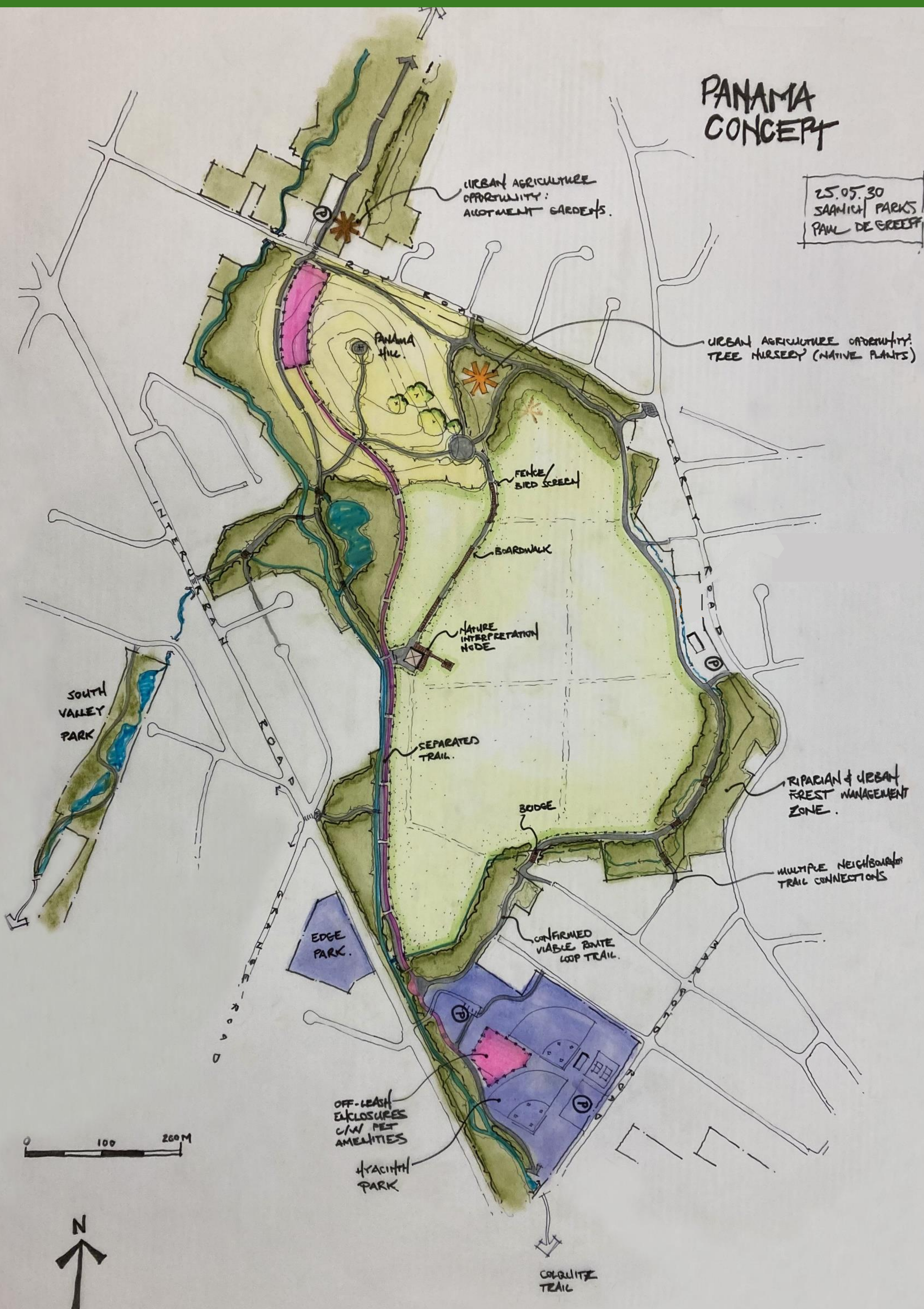
Goal 5: Maintain and Enhance Stormwater Function

Actions:

- Work with stewardship groups on wetland and stream research,
- Explore restoration opportunities with stewardship groups,
- Maintain and enhance stormwater infrastructure based on Saanich's Integrated Stormwater Management Planning.

*Goals and actions are proposed to be implemented over a number of years as budgets allow.

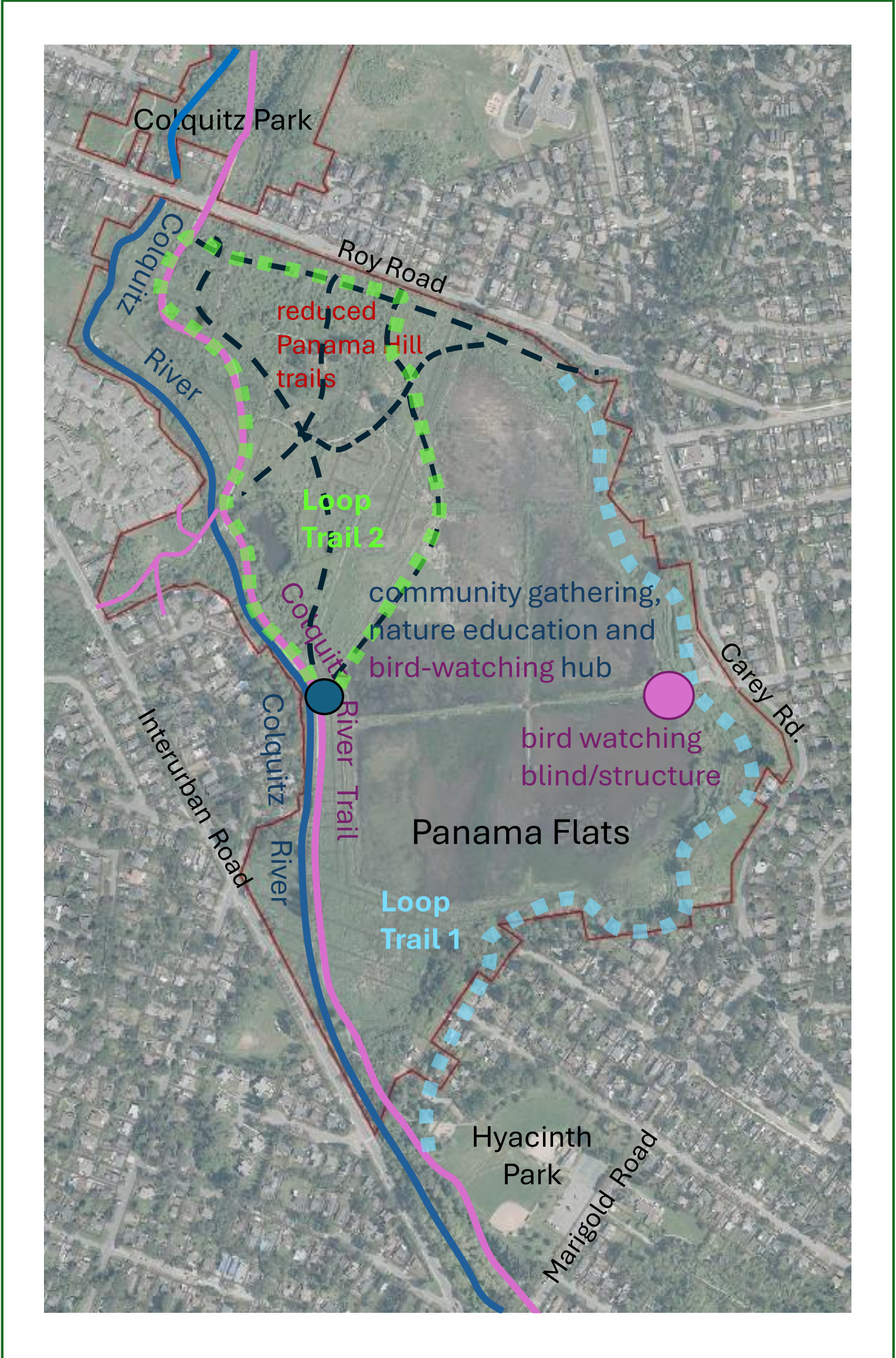
Panama Flats – Updated Concept Plan



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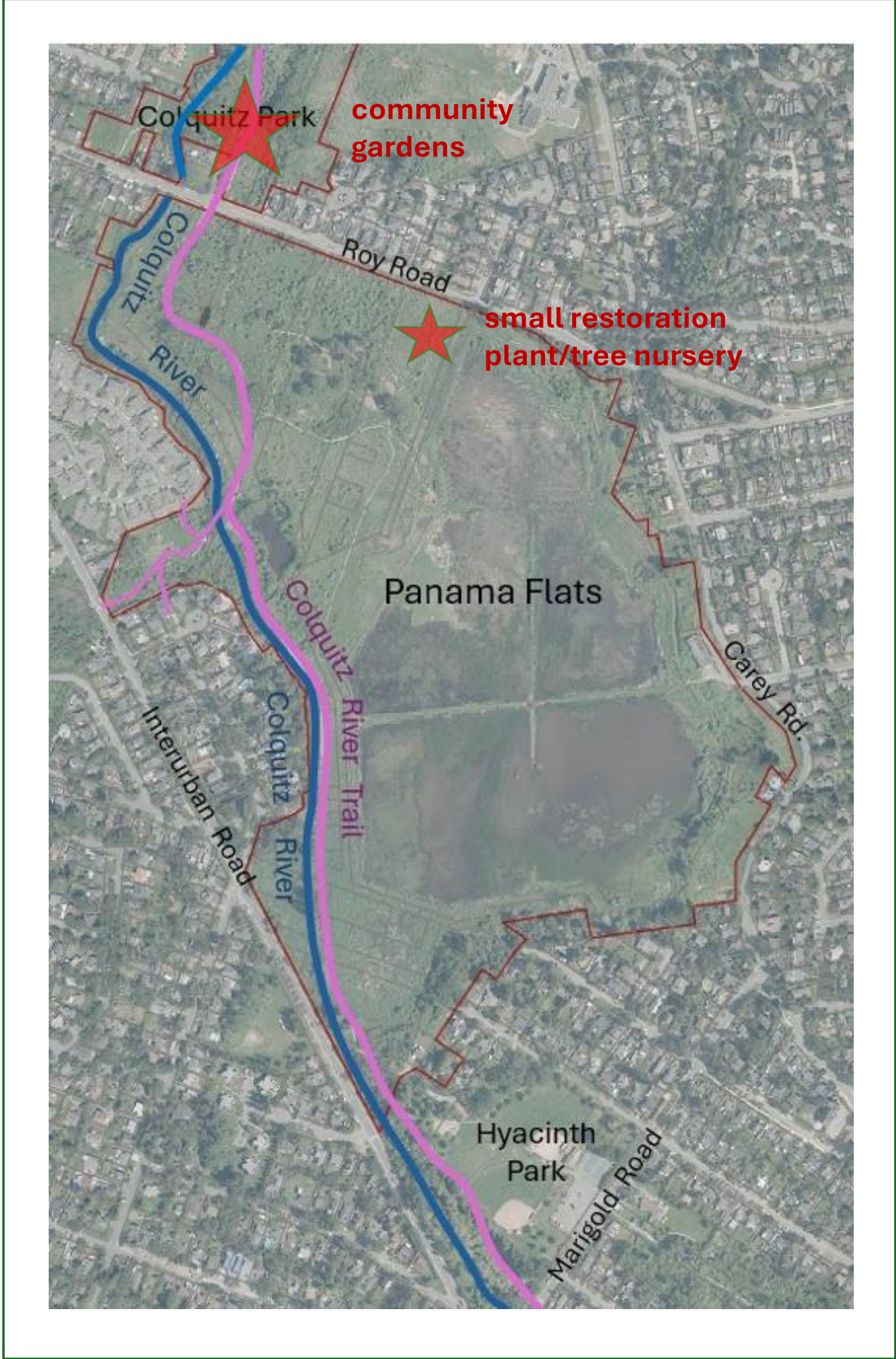
Proposed Plan Components

Trails and Community

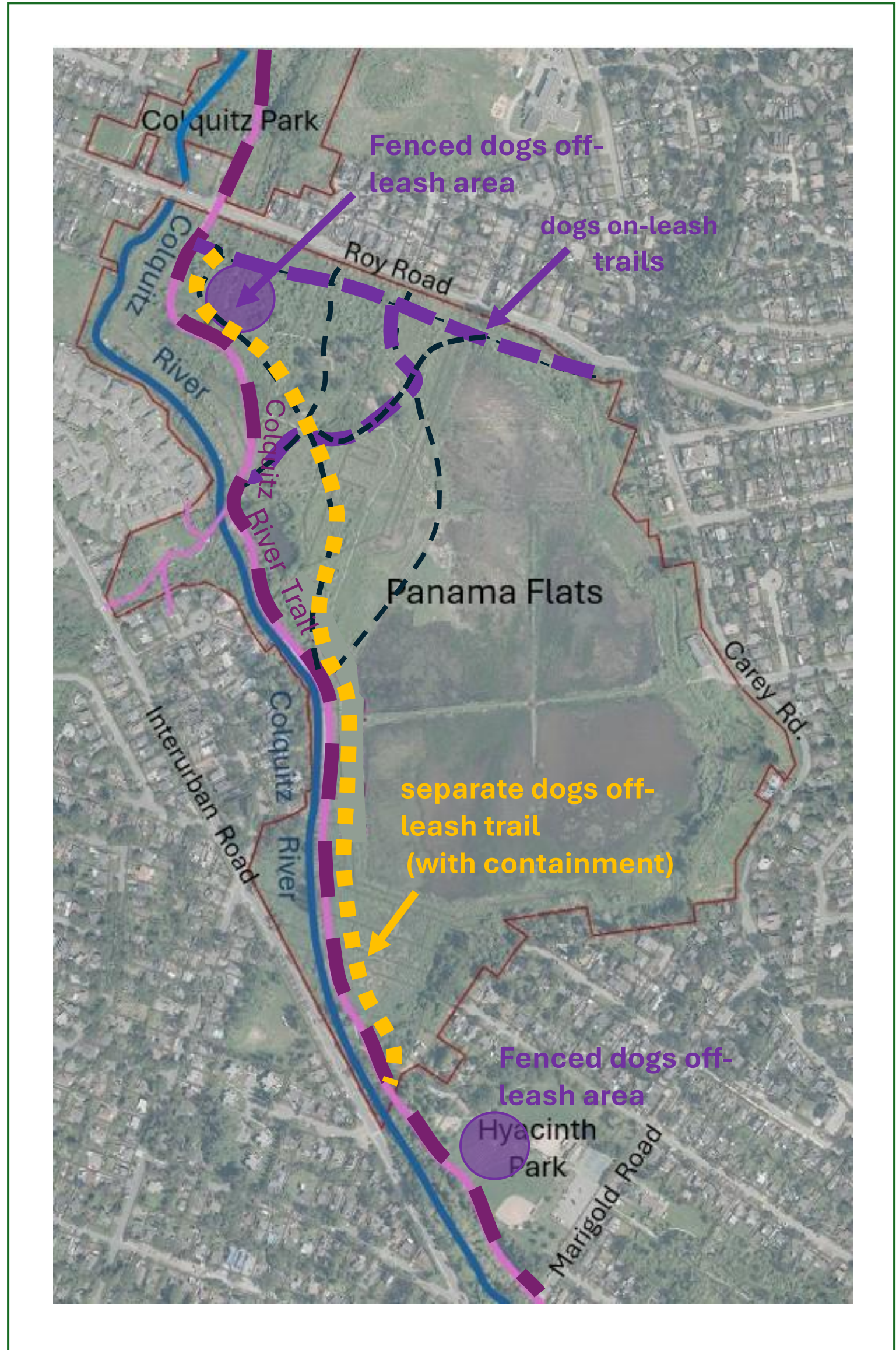


Saanich proposes to use existing trails (whenever possible) to create a functional trail system with access to Panama Hill and other key features while respecting wildlife. Trails shown are conceptual to show intent – detailed design will be completed prior to trail construction.

Small-Scale Agriculture

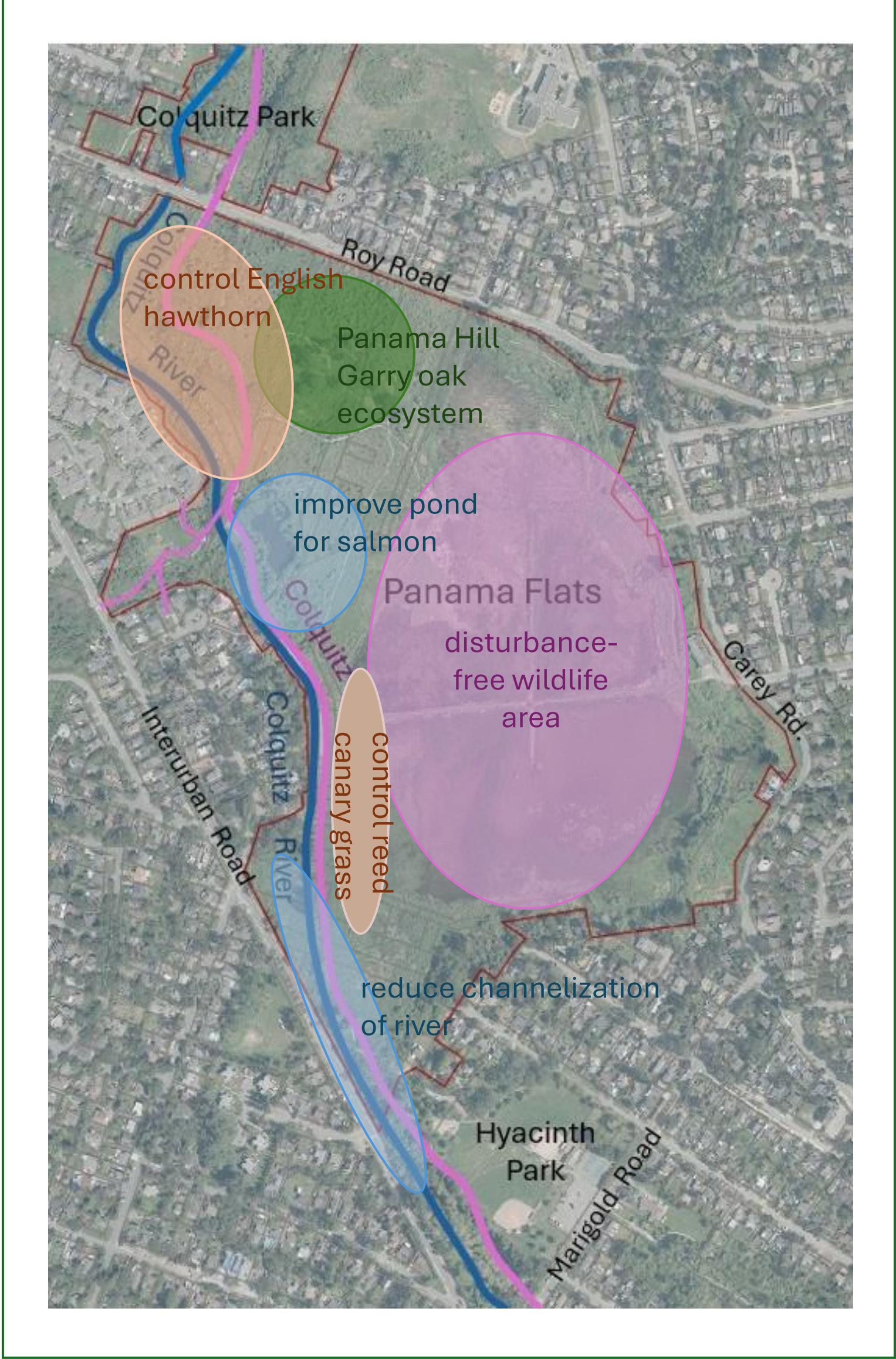


Community gardens require significant resources and a community-based group to manage them on a long-term basis. Saanich may support gardens in this area if a suitable group comes forward.



Dog Amenities

A dedicated off-leash area near Roy Road will compliment the one at Hyacinth Park (which will be made permanent). A separated segment(s) of the Colquitz River Trail for dogs off-leash may be built if future trail traffic warrants it. Dogs are permitted on-leash anytime on the Colquitz River Trail, and trails to the north as shown.



Restoration Areas

Restoration projects vary dramatically in scope and cost. Opportunities will be sought through partnerships with independent community groups, and completed as funding permits.

Panama Flats – Next Steps

Questionnaire



We want your feedback!

Please fill out our on-line questionnaire before July 16, find it at saanich.ca/panamaflats or scan the QR code.

Saanich Council

Saanich staff will reflect feedback from this event in a final Updated Concept Plan for Panama Flats. A report will accompany the Updated Concept Plan at Saanich Council on September 8, 2025.

Implementation

Upon support from Saanich Council, elements of the Updated Concept Plan will be implemented in the priority order determined at this event, as budgets allow.

Thank you for your participation.

