

Morro Bay Waterfront Master Plan Stakeholder Focus Groups – Key Themes

KEY THEMES FROM FOCUS GROUP MEETINGS

Introduction

The City of Morro Bay and its consultant team, led by PlaceWorks, are conducting an update to the Waterfront Master Plan, which will provide a blueprint for the future development and enhancement of Morro Bay's waterfront areas. The Waterfront Master Plan will ensure balanced growth that supports economic vitality while preserving the unique character and environmental assets that make Morro Bay's waterfront special.

As part of the community engagement process, the City and PlaceWorks conducted four stakeholder focus group discussions on August 18th and 19th, 2025 to gather on-the-ground knowledge and experience from key community representatives. These meetings engaged Environmental Groups, Business Community representatives, Community Groups, and Harbor-related stakeholders to understand opportunities, challenges, and priorities for the waterfront planning area. The purpose of these meetings was to:

- Engage with key stakeholders to discuss waterfront development and management in Morro Bay.
- Gather on-the-ground knowledge and experience to understand opportunities, challenges, and priorities for the waterfront planning areas.
- Collect input on potential solutions and strategies to guide the updated Waterfront Master Plan.

Meeting Format

The City and PlaceWorks hosted stakeholder focus group meetings with representatives from local environmental organizations, businesses, harbor-related and government entities, and community groups. Each meeting included 6-7 stakeholders and members of the City project team.

PlaceWorks staff facilitated each meeting, following a discussion guide tailored to address specific topics related to the participants' expertise and interests, covering topics such as environmental protection, economic development, circulation, parking, community access, and harbor operations. The project team asked eight questions of each group. The meeting approach followed a facilitated discussion format with prepared questions specific to each stakeholder group, while allowing for open dialogue and discussion of additional topics of concern and for participants to ask questions of the project team.

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The project team taking part in the meetings took detailed notes of the discussions and relied on the notes and discussions to identify key themes. Responses often addressed multiple overlapping themes. The feedback has been organized thematically, rather than by individual stakeholder group or participant, reflecting the interconnected nature of waterfront planning issues and the common themes that emerged across different groups.

Key Themes by Topic Area

Waterfront Infrastructure and Maintenance

Stakeholders identified significant infrastructure needs throughout the waterfront area, including:

- Harbor infrastructure, including maintenance of docks, pier reinforcement, breakwaters, and ongoing dredging needs.
- The need for a large boat haul-out facility for current harbor users.
- The existing yellow sodium lighting along the Embarcadero was frequently cited as inadequate and in need of replacement with brighter, more modern lighting.
- Sidewalk improvements and street maintenance were also highlighted as priorities.
- Stormwater runoff mapping and management emerged as both an infrastructure and environmental concern.

Circulation and Access

Improving connectivity was a major theme across all groups, including:

- The need for better access to the Embarcadero from the north, specifically exploring bridge access across Morro Creek to improve circulation between the north and south portions of the waterfront.
- Enhanced pedestrian and bicycle connectivity throughout the waterfront planning area.
- Improved connections between the waterfront and downtown and Highway 1.
- Suggestions for connecting Market Plaza and Centennial Parkway to the waterfront to improve the transition between downtown and waterfront areas.
- Trolley service enhancement, including expanded marketing and free access for residents.
- General walkability improvements, including wider sidewalks and better nighttime lighting.
- Water taxi service as an alternative transportation option between different waterfront areas.

Parking Management

Parking challenges generated significant discussion, with stakeholders sharing concerns about the lack of parking during peak visitation and special events, noting:

- Support for implementation of paid parking, particularly at Morro Rock.

- Time enforcement on the Embarcadero is necessary to improve turnover for businesses.
- Designated employee parking areas versus visitor parking areas.
- Concerns about special events negatively impacting parking availability.
- Suggestions for alternative solutions such as off-site parking (parking lots or parking structures with shuttle or trolley service to the waterfront and downtown areas).

Natural Resource Protection and Enhancement

Environmental stakeholders emphasized:

- Acknowledging and celebrating Morro Bay as a unique destination for watching wildlife.
- Protecting critical habitats in the expanded WMP planning area including eelgrass beds, bird nesting and roosting areas, and wildlife corridors.
- Updating ESHA (Environmentally Sensitive Habitat Area) maps.
- Prioritizing education and enforcement of existing regulations related to human-wildlife interactions, particularly around sea otters, seals, and nesting birds.
- Sea level rise adaptation and climate resilience planning are essential, with support for nature-based solutions including constructed wetlands at appropriate sites.
- Morro Creek adjacent uses should be nature-based, integrated with the ecological functions of the ecosystem.
- Considering also addressing the dunes/sandspit and back bay when considering environmental implications for the project area as they are all connected ecosystems.

Economic Development and Business Support

Business representatives highlighted the need for enhanced visitor-serving commercial development while addressing current operational challenges, including:

- Reviving and enhancing the waterfront, described as "dead after 7pm", with sufficient lighting and amenities to draw evening visitors.
- Streamlining the development process and establishing clear design guidelines to support business investment.
- Consideration of seasonal variations in clientele (visitors in-season, locals off-season) that affects business operations in planning.
- Transitioning from an industrial town with an economy dependent on industrial uses to a visitor-dependent economy while maintaining Morro Bay's roots as a fishing village.

Future Development

The sites of the former Power Plant (owned by Vistra) and Wastewater Treatment Plant (owned by the City) generated significant discussion, such as:

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- Suggesting visitor-serving uses for the former Power Plant site, such as amphitheater space, hotels, or campgrounds (noting deed restrictions may limit certain development options).
- Potential for campgrounds or nature-based solutions for flood mitigation and stormwater management, such as constructed wetlands, at the former Wastewater Treatment Plant (noting potential flooding and coastal hazard constraints).
- Concern with potential contamination on both sites and time, cost, and responsibility of clean-up.
- Environmental groups strongly opposed industrial uses at either site.

Community Access and Amenities

Community representatives emphasized the need for equitable access to waterfront benefits for all residents, not just tourists, including:

- Family-friendly amenities, including playgrounds, restrooms, and picnic areas.
- Provide more mini parks or green spaces, comfortable and accessible, along the Embarcadero, for people and families to take breaks, enjoy the scenery, and create a connected experience.
- Enhanced community event spaces and volunteer opportunities for waterfront beautification and maintenance.
- More regular updates on planning efforts, as some residents expressed feeling excluded from decision-making processes.
- Improvements to Coleman Park to better serve community recreational needs.

Harbor Operations and Management

Harbor-related stakeholders highlighted:

- The need for improved coordination between different users, including commercial fishing, recreational boating, and visitor activities.
- Concern for the future of the Morro Bay fishing industry, largely due to State regulations.
- The need for a large boat haul out.
- Ongoing challenges related to infrastructure maintenance and funding for capital improvements.
- Agency coordination difficulties and overlapping jurisdictions as operational barriers requiring attention.

Cross-Cutting Themes

Balancing Priorities

A central challenge identified across all groups involves balancing competing priorities: tourist versus resident needs; challenge of balancing economic development and environmental

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protection; public access that also considers wildlife protection; adding paid and employee parking while enhancing existing parking enforcement and keeping the Embarcadero walkable; and development while preserving Morro Bay's unique character.

Implementation and Governance

Stakeholders emphasized the need for adequate funding for improvements, better coordination between agencies, enhanced community involvement in decision-making, and streamlined regulatory processes to support implementation of plan goals.

NEXT STEPS

The project will compile and combine input from these focus groups with other information gathered throughout the community engagement process will inform recommendations for the update of the Waterfront Master Plan. City staff and the consultant team will present this summary to the Waterfront Master Plan Advisory Committee and the public during the Committee's September meeting.