



GOLDEN STATE LAND CONSERVANCY

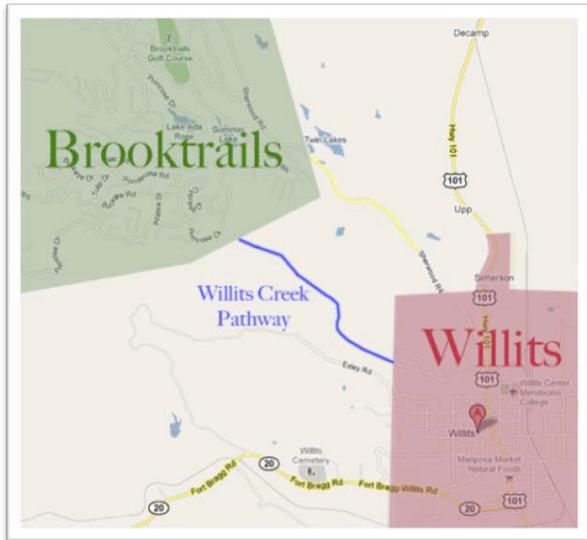
Willits Creek Pathway



Walking south toward town

The Golden State Land Conservancy has taken the initiative to promote efforts to open a “managed multi-use trail” between the Brooktrails Township and the City of Willits. There is currently only one travel connection between Brooktrails and Willits—Sherwood Road. Sherwood Road is dangerous, and was built only for car and truck traffic. Most pedestrians and bicyclists cannot safely travel between these two very close and interdependent communities. This steep narrow country road has no bike lane or pedestrian path and can only be used safely by vehicles. Long-time residents know that another trail once connected Willits and Brooktrails for hikers and bicyclists. This historic trail if pursued, would allow pedestrians, bicyclists, and equestrians safe travel between the two communities.

Traditionally known as the *Willits Creek Trail*, this old lumber mill railroad right of way once connected Willits and Brooktrails. The roadway had been open to the public in the past as a trail but was closed by the landowners in the late 1990’s because of the private cost of management, security, maintenance and safety. But the Golden State Land Conservancy thinks there is a better way.



The Conservancy has been helping people conserve land and enjoy nature throughout the state of California. With tens of thousands of acres of conserved land throughout the state, the Conservancy has helped people develop creative solutions to complicated land-use issues.

In the case of the *Willits Creek Trail*, the Conservancy believes the solution is to manage access, maintenance, safety and security along this historic pathway. In that spirit, the Conservancy proposes the creation of the Willits Creek *Pathway*—

a managed, multi-use pathway eventually connecting the neighboring communities of Brooktrails Township and the City of Willits.

A managed pathway means pathway access would be allowed for permitted groups and individuals who are participating in pathway programs and activities, and abide by the pathway's guidelines.

There is strong public support to eventually reconnect Brooktrails' 2,300-acre Redwood Park and miles of trails, and with the City's schools, parks, and urban amenities. The existing historic trail parallels Willits Creek (a Coho, Chinook and Steelhead spawning habitat) and follows an old railroad right-of-way between Brooktrails Township and the City of Willits. Brooktrails has an easement along this right-of-way for maintenance of their sewer line to Willits, and depends upon this roadway for an emergency vehicle access. The roadway meanders through about 1.1 miles of land with three private owners.

In the Spring of 2011, the Golden State Land Conservancy purchased two non-contiguous parcels along the route owned by one of the three landowners. This purchase provides the Conservancy with a 40-foot right-of-way along the southern one-third of the existing roadway, which connects to Mill Creek Drive inside the City of Willits. This allows the Conservancy to manage a multi-use pathway in order to access the urban nature preserve. Programs and activities can include local students, teachers and parents involved in environmental and restoration education and scientific study, and/or low-impact recreational visitors (e.g. hikers, birders, runners, and bicyclists).

At this time, visitors to the Pathway are able to register for programs and activities offered on the urban nature preserve property. In addition, the pathway would be patrolled throughout the week, as well as during scheduled activities, and would be closed when no programs are planned.



There are plans to create an environmental education center for children and adults. Willits Creek provides spawning habitat for all three endangered anadromous species—Coho, Chinook, and Steelhead. This along with other unique features, such as a vernal pool along the path, would open up outdoor educational opportunities for the Willits and Brooktrails communities.

Those already familiar with the Willits Creek area know of the Pathway's beauty and its uniqueness. Under a managed system of access, landowners

could have confidence that Pathway visitors will respect their private property and privacy. The Golden State Land Conservancy intends to demonstrate this by successful management of the properties that were recently purchased by the Conservancy along this historic pathway.

The Conservancy has received technical assistance from the National Park Service, LandPaths, and Bay Area Ridge Trail Council; and encouragement from citizens and neighbors in the community, the staff of Brooktrails Township, City of Willits, and the Willits Kids Club, Willits Economic Localization and the Willits Environmental Center.

The people of Willits and Brooktrails deserve a safe pathway for pedestrians, bicyclists, and equestrians. We envision that for the first few years, the Conservancy will provide management, insurance, pay property tax and will coordinate security and fire prevention with public safety agencies. Community groups are committed to providing volunteer stewardship. A new community based non-profit corporation will be formed to own and manage the Pathway, while, the Conservancy will retain conservation and trail easements on the properties.



The Willits Creek Pathway concept is a way to enjoy nature and its beauty while eventually connecting Brooktrails Redwood Park and its many miles of open trails with Willits' schools and services in a safe and manageable way.



Looking west from the native grassland toward the oak woodland and redwood forest of the coast range, with the Pathway meandering along the edge of the trees.

Respect for private property and privacy will be a primary concern for the management of the Willits Creek Pathway. The Conservancy has an ongoing effort to communicate with neighbors to convey this sense of responsibility. At this time, the two other landowners along the historic trail do not allow public access through their property. Therefore, the Conservancy is only able to permit groups and individuals to access the urban nature preserve that we own along our right-of-way from Mill Creek Drive in Willits. At this time, we have no access from the north through the Smith Ranch. Please respect the adjoining landowners wishes.

You can learn more about the Pathway and our other programs on www.gslc.us, or call the Pathway Manager, Dave Madrigal, at 841-7140; or Bob Whitney, President of the Golden State Land Conservancy at 459-3906.

Willits Creek Pathway— a natural connection!