

The Essence of Brooktrails

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The name "Brooktrails" is tied to three perspectives:

- One perspective derives from the governmental entity known as the Brooktrails Township which encompasses 12.6 square miles containing 6,605± parcels making it the largest community in area in Mendocino County and which was home to 3,311 residents according to the 2010 Census making it the fourth largest community in population in Mendocino County.
- Another perspective is an image derived from a confusing mishmash of conflicting individual opinions held by those who live or own property inside the Township and those who live elsewhere.
- Then there is the vision of the developer of the Brooktrails Vacation Village subdivisions, a perspective which has evolved into *The Essence of Brooktrails*.

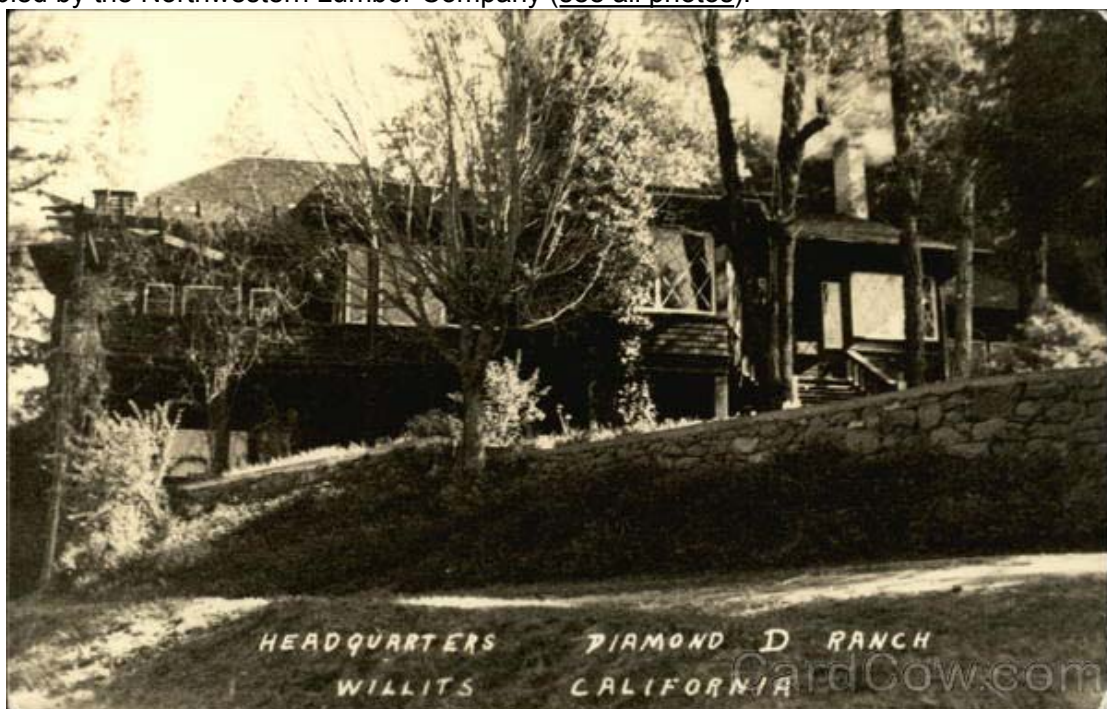
To understand Brooktrails, you must understand all three perspectives.

Brooktrails Vacation Village

The name of our community comes from the development of the Brooktrails Vacation Village subdivisions in the late 1960's. Understanding the history behind the development is important to understanding the essence of the Brooktrails Township.



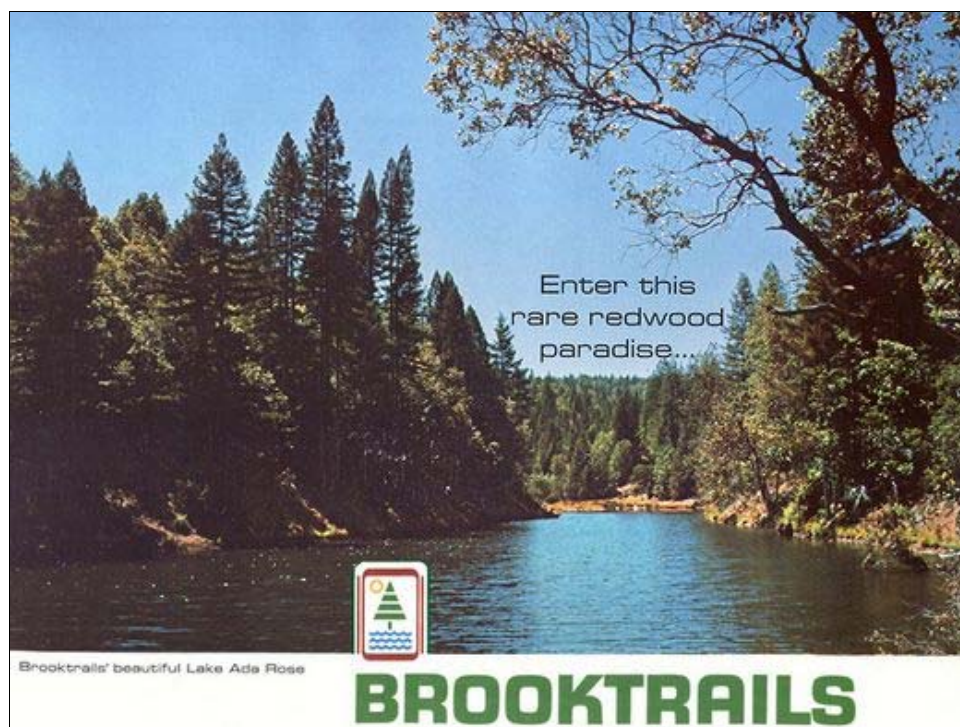
Brooktrails area property was historically used for a wide range of land uses. In the 1880s, the Brooktrails Township area was occupied by the Northwestern Lumber Company ([see all photos](#)).



As logging operations ended, the land was sold to the Diamond D Ranch which was a dude ranch. The Ranch was described in a 1938 update to a travel brochure Guest Ranches on the Lines of Southern Pacific (large file) as follows:

DIAMOND D RANCH. Wallace E. Hiatt, manager. Mail and telegraph address, Willits, California. Open all year. 50 guests. Rooms with private bath in main ranch house. Cabins with central shower and toilets. Meals served in central dining room. Rates, \$40 to \$50 per week; \$150 to \$190 per month, saddle horse included. Private or special guides, \$5 per day. Take Northwestern Pacific Railroad to Willits, California, where ranch car meets you, no charge. Willits to ranch, 2 miles. Largest cattle ranch in northern California with guest accommodations. Good horses. Picturesque ranch life, swimming in private lake, tennis, fishing, small and big game hunting.

Ultimately, with the approval of the Mendocino County Board of Supervisors the land was subdivided by Brooktrails Company Ltd., of Beverly Hills and New York as Brooktrails Vacation Village in the 1960s. Approximately 6,000 lots were created most ranging in size from one-sixth to one-third of an acre, but with a few larger parcels up to 230 acres. The development was intended primarily for second homes. Most of the parcels were sold by the early 1970's.



Of significance to anyone considering a home in Brooktrails is understanding the expressed intent of the developer of the Brooktrails Vacation Village. Located approximately three miles west of the City of Willits, California, and about 20 miles from the coastal community of Fort Bragg, Brooktrails offers residents an environment within a second growth mixed redwood forest where you can see the stars at night and breathe clean air while enjoying relatively inexpensive housing.

Key to assuring the continuation of that environment was the dedication of approximately 2,500 acres to the Brooktrails Resort Improvement District to be preserved as a conservation area. This land is Brooktrails Redwood Park, some of which is available for recreation and some is considered greenbelt. The promise of this dedication was discussed extensively in newspaper articles of the time.

In a December 17, 1967, article in the *New York Times*, Brooktrails was noted as being the first community in the United States to blend a four-square-mile redwood and mixed-growth forest conservation park with a contiguous, fully improved residential area. The term coined for this residential area built in a forest is *hyleopolis* (get used to this word).

As explained in a April 11, 1969, *Christian Science Monitor* article, the term “hyleopolis” refers to the character of an urban-forest interface where protection of the forest is paramount in order to retain the community’s essence. This had already been made clear in the lengthy *New York Times* article as follows:

The Board of Supervisors of Mendocino County, a north coastal area, is represented on the board of the Brooktrails Resort Improvement District, to which the developer dedicated some 2,000 acres for conservation. There is no way, Mr. Beaumont emphasized, for the developer to regain control of the acreage and change his plans about conservation, even if he ever wished to do so.

Dr. Gerald Partain, professor of forestry economics at Humboldt State College in Arcata, to the north, has been retained by the Brooktrails Resort Improvement District as a consultant for the conservation and recreation aspects. He expressed excitement over the prospect of setting up a management plan for the conservation area, "trying our hand at something other than timber production."

A naturalist guide is in preparation. The park lands are a refuge for deer, raccoon, red fox and other animals. Professor Partain expects the lands to be a kind of laboratory for his students. He said a good job performed here in management practices should convince "developers who are out to make their buck that conservation practices pay better than jamming houses together."

That was *The Essence of Brooktrails* as proposed by the developer and approved by the Mendocino County Board of Supervisors from the beginning. Maintaining that essence is the purpose of Ordinance 63, adopted by the Township Board in 1988 formally establishing the Brooktrails Redwood Park and Ordinance 68 adopting a Master Plan for Brooktrails Redwood Park.

The tension between the desire to (a) maintain and protect the Redwood Park environment and (b) permit a comfortable 21st Century suburban lifestyle for Brooktrails residents creates an ongoing challenge for the Township. Within the Township golf, hiking, picnicking, jogging, and other activities continue to be readily available.

Brooktrails Township Community Services District

As noted above, the Mendocino County Board of Supervisors created the Brooktrails Resort Improvement District (BRID) and in the early period even had one of the Supervisors serve as a member of the District's five member Board of Directors. The successor to BRID is the Brooktrails Township Community Services District (Township).

As can be seen from the map on the next page, the Township is divided into three service areas:

1. *Sylvandale*, a large rural parcel subdivision which the Township Fire Department serves and which according to 2010 Census Data had a population of 26;
2. *Spring Creek*, a large rural parcel subdivision which receives Township Fire Department and water utility services and which according to 2010 Census Data had a population of 40; and
3. *Brooktrails*, mostly made up of small suburban lots surrounding Brooktrails Redwood Park to which the Township provides Fire, Water, Sewer, Solid Waste, Parks and Recreation, Planning (a power shared with the County), and related services, and which according to Census Data (from these two census totals - Brooktrails and Condor Road Area) had a population of 3,245.

All other local government services are provided by the County of Mendocino. Of immediate concern to most residents are police services provided by the Mendocino County Sheriff's Department and road maintenance and storm drainage services provided by the Mendocino County Road Department. The only exception important to some Brooktrails residents is Ells Field, a small aircraft airport operated by the City of Willits adjacent to and accessed through the Township.

The Township has a five member elected Board of Directors who set policy for the operation of the District by adopting ordinances, resolutions, and an annual budget. The Board also appoints a General Manager who implements policies, supervises District finances, and hires and controls all District employees.

Fire Protection in Brooktrails Township

By definition a "hyleopolitan" community represents a community at risk for wildfire. Brooktrails is no exception and is listed on the national list of communities that are at high risk of damage from wildfire (see [CalFire website](#) and scroll down for more information). A discussion of the fire risk particularly within the greenbelt portion of Brooktrails Redwood Park can be found [here](#). The obvious fact about being the place for which the term "hyleopolis" was coined is that the community must acknowledge the wildfire risk and effectively manage it.

It is important to note that the land area generally logged by Northwestern Lumber Company and subsequently used by the Diamond D ranch has not been directly impacted by a large wildfire since the 1944 Ironies #2 Fire seen on the map on the next page with current Brooktrails roads overlaid:

In 1944 there was no [Brooktrails Fire Department](#) with two full-time professional fire officers and 20+ volunteers, nor were there [CalFire](#) helicopters and bombers dropping water and fire retardant. No newspaper articles with headlines such as [Recent projects improve Brooktrails fire safety](#) reflected an ongoing effort to construct fuel break buffers.

Not only do the Brooktrails Fire Department personnel perform the normal duties associated with fighting fires, responding to medical emergencies, and working with CalFire on eliminating fire hazards within Brooktrails Redwood Park, they operate programs specifically oriented to the hazards facing a hyleopolitan community.

The Brooktrails Fire Department has for three decades maintained an ongoing [Hazard Abatement Program](#) requiring private property owners to eliminate defined hazards by July 1 of each year. In 2012 the department issued 1,004 grass and 263 wooded lot notices of hazardous violations.

The Brooktrails Fire Department sponsors the 35 member [Community Emergency Response Team \(CERT\)](#), the only one in Mendocino County. It assists with the specialized emergency response needs not only in Brooktrails, but Willits and Laytonville. While a number of services provided by CERT volunteers are described on the web site, one includes helping with evacuation in the face of an approaching 2008 wildfire, which was ultimately suppressed by fire fighters but threatened homes. Which brings up the problem of evacuation during emergencies.

Brooktrails has an [evacuation plan](#). CERT volunteers will work with Mendocino County Sheriff's deputies and Fire Department personnel to assist Brooktrails residents should an evacuation be necessary. Brooktrails does have only one regular access road - Sherwood Road. While a second access road is well into the planning stage, it may be many years before it is constructed. But there are alternative access emergency routes over normally gated private roadways leading both to U.S. 101 and State Route 20 which would be opened in case of an emergency.



Brooktrails also has a number of special regulations in addition to a burning ban from June 1 until the first rains each year. Other regulations designed to prevent fires include a prohibition against the discharge of firearms, against the use of off-road vehicles in the Park, and against the picking of mushrooms in the Park because the practice has attracted many who do not honor the Park's status as a conservation forest.

It is through its Fire Department that Brooktrails Township deals with the prevention of wildfires and with the suppression of wildfires with the assistance and support of the CalFire and Little Lake (Willits) Fire Department personnel and equipment. Township residents support the Fire Department with a special fire tax and a portion of the small post-Proposition 13 property tax revenues allocated to the Township.

Benefits Resulting from the Development of Brooktrails

It is hard to place the development of Brooktrails Vacation Village subdivisions in context. The proper frame of reference is California in 1965. California's population had grown 2½ times in the period from 1940 to 1960. Federal and State loan guarantee programs had pushed home ownership to an all time high despite the occasional economic downturn. The reason the Legislature approved the idea of Resort Improvement Districts was, in part, to keep the economy flowing. Encouraging second home construction was thought to be good policy.

Obviously, in the late 1960's and early 1970's, the construction of roads and utility infrastructure - not to mention new homes - provided an economic boost to the region surrounding Brooktrails. Despite the occasional economic downturns which affected the entire nation, Brooktrails has continued to create opportunities for residential construction.

In 2010, the Brooktrails Township had become the community of full-time residence for 3,311 people. According to Census Data, in 2010 that population controlled \$83,374,291± in annual income and represented 1,660 people actively employed. This is a substantial economic contribution to the region.

Brooktrails Redwood Park offers these residents and visitors a nine-hole golf course, picnic tables at Ohl Grove, a Par Course for running and exercise, a baseball field, and an extensive forest hiking trail system. A community center building is available to rent for events.

But beyond providing facilities for public use, Brooktrails Township residents have continued to maintain the conservation forest envisioned in the original development plan. The most recent commitment can be found the the May 2006 Greenbelt Stewardship Plan which offers the following initial statements:

Purpose:

- To protect and promote the ecosystem integrity and sustainability of the 2,500- acre Greenbelt.
- To maintain the resilience of the system to adapt to short-term stresses and long-term change.

Long-term Goal:

- To develop a mosaic of native redwood, conifer and hardwood forest, consisting of a mix of types and ages that promotes a diverse natural forest.
- It is to be a preserve, with restoration and minimal intervention.

Environmental concerns have resulted in a number of projects and activities to assure the goal of keeping a conservation forest. For example, in 2001 a coordinated effort to provide for the annual Chinook Salmon and Steelhead Trout spawning season was approved. The Brooktrails Township as lead agency working jointly with the State Water Resources Control Board and the Department of Fish and Wildlife, with support from the University of California at Davis, completed a \$180,912 project to restore portions of 5,765 foot section of Willits Creek by installing gravel beds, six vortex weirs, significant bank stabilizing, and riparian vegetation beginning at the former Summer Lake Dam and extending to the Lake Emily spillway.

The Township continues to maintain the habitat and manages the discharge of water from Lake Emily to maximize the Creek conditions during the spawning season. This improves Pacific marine fisheries as well as maintaining a balanced ecosystem within the Creek which is an essential element of Brooktrails Redwood Park.

Perceived "Problems" with Brooktrails

Within the various interest groups concerned about Brooktrails are misunderstandings, some of which have become conventional wisdom. For instance, one of those misunderstandings is that there is a building moratorium within Brooktrails. That is not true today nor in the foreseeable future.

But more insidious misrepresentations of the truth are more frequently heard in a kind of cycle related to the economy. Among many "oldtimers" who are not Brooktrails residents or property owners, some disdain is expressed using terms like "real estate scam." Three facts when considered in isolation have led to a false sense of validation of this type of criticism over the years.

The "Problem" with Brooktrails - Part 1

First there was the development itself. With the approval of the Mendocino County Board of Supervisors, the Brooktrails Company Ltd. did subdivide the land into 6,000+ parcels. It is important to note that by 1972 they had sold almost all the parcels. The target market was the American middle class homeowner. In Brooktrails a second home, a vacation home, seemed available to the many instead of the wealthy few. It was a feasible goal with affordable lots and mortgage rates hovering around 7.5%.

Unfortunately in 1973 mortgage rates started climbing, hitting 18% in 1981. It was part of an overall severe 1973–75 recession and included the 1979 energy crisis. The best way to understand the situation for Brooktrails in the late 1970's is to think of collapse of the housing market in 2008.

Many people "walked away" from their Brooktrails lots in the late 1970's. They quit paying their property taxes and assessments. The most significant impact of this was on assessment bonds issued by the County of Mendocino that funded roads and other improvements.

Was this actually the result of a "real estate scam" as some would say? For those Brooktrails residents who live in homes built during that early period as this writer has for over 25 years, our answer is "obviously not." For a person who walked away from a lot, calling it a "scam" helped to rationalize a set of personal events that began with their buying the lot and ended up with a financial loss.

If you own one of the lots today, the current extremely low mortgage interest rates actually would permit one to own a second home at a relatively low cost. But that doesn't mean you should start construction tomorrow.

One thing seems fairly certain - the developer of Brooktrails had a vision for middle class Americans. That vision is not different from the recently promoted "ownership society" model that collapsed with the economy in 2008.

This is a constantly repeating cycle in our economy. Brooktrails was, and may be, more vulnerable to economic downturns than most communities. But that is a problem to solve. It isn't because the hyleopolis vision was a scam.

The "Problem" with Brooktrails - Part 2

Faced with a potential default on bonds issued by the County for Brooktrails development, a few in Brooktrails working through the District in the late 1970's sought someone to market the tax defaulted lots. The local real estate offices failed to step up. But the idea appealed to the Deerwood Corporation which through an effective marketing program sold the lots, financing the purchase and paying off the tax and assessment defaults. And those lot sales resulted in increased tax revenue due to increased assessments.

It doesn't take a genius to understand that in 2008, along with the rest of the nation, Brooktrails lots lost value and again owners walked away from them usually because of more pressing personal financial problems. Because of a tax revenue financing scheme known as the Teeter Plan instituted in the late 1990 by the Legislature and adopted by the County of Mendocino, there is again a debt problem for the County due to unpaid taxes and assessments in Brooktrails.

This time around, some have called Brooktrails "a failed subdivision" because of the Deerwood sales program that bailed the County out from the 1970's economic crash. That criticism does not come from people who enjoy living in the Brooktrails homes built on those lots in the 1980's and 1990's. And despite assertions to the contrary, many of us are paying taxes based upon an assessed value established when those lots were sold in the 1990's.

One thing seems fairly certain - the people at the Deerwood Corporation embraced the vision of the original Brooktrails developer, a vision for middle class Americans. That vision is the "ownership society" model that collapsed with the economy in 2008. But the Deerwood Corporation financed many of those lots and, like the County and the District, is still invested in Brooktrails continuing success as the economy begins its recovery.

There is no "Problem" with The Essence of Brooktrails

It is simply not true that Brooktrails lots are worthless. The American economy is very slowly recovering from a housing market crash in 2008. Real estate sales are down but lots have been sold in 2012-13. The next person who builds a home to live in Brooktrails will enjoy *The Essence of Brooktrails*, described in a 1969 United Press International article as follows:

The only known hyleopolis in the United States is located in the mountains of northern California's Mendocino county. It is called Brooktrails and it combines a resort community with a conservation forest, mainly the revered and stately redwoods.

Today the community cannot be called a "resort" community, though some homes are occupied part time. Most of the 1,500+ homes in Brooktrails are occupied by permanent residents, about 3,311 of them. It is a community of people sharing the common experience of living with and within a conservation forest known as Brooktrails Redwood Park.

Yes, individual residents and property owners have problems, financial and otherwise. Yes, the Brooktrails Township government and the County of Mendocino government have problems with finances and complex policy. But Americans and their local governments have problems. It is no different here. That in no way means *The Essence of Brooktrails* is lost to the community's 3,311 residents, their neighbors, and visitors. In March 19, 2013 the *Willits News* reported:



Twenty third- and fourth-graders from Willits Elementary Charter descended on Ohl Grove in Brooktrails looking for the elusive redwood trees. Luckily there were a few there waiting to be found.

Students created a web of all the different animals and plants of the ecosystem, and saw how everything is interconnected....

Many who live here know that "[Ohl Grove in Brooktrails](#)" is named for John Ohl, owner of Brooktrails Company Ltd., who died in 1994. His vision of a conservation forest is not dead to local school children and others who live in or visit Brooktrails Township.

Today the Brooktrails Township strives to protect and conserve the interests of the owners of lots and larger rural parcels and of its residents by providing the following services:

- fire prevention and suppression along with emergency medical response;
- water collection, treatment, and distribution;
- wastewater collection and disposal;
- solid waste collection and disposal;
- community planning and construction design review; and
- Brooktrails Redwood Park active use facilities including the Brooktrails Golf Course, the Par Course, a baseball field, a playground, and a Community Center building, along with the 2,500+ acres of passive use lands crossed by miles of hiking trails and home to Lake Emily and Lake Ada Rose.

The links at the top of this page will lead you to more information about the Brooktrails Township.

NOTE: This document has been adapted from the BTCSD website to format it for printing. The original can be viewed by going to <http://www.btcSD.org/> and select the link "About BTCSD".