

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
May 27, 2010

ROSE CREEK WATERSHED TRAIL PLANNING

File No. 08-115-01
Project Manager: Megan Cooper

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$200,000 to the San Diego County Bicycle Coalition to complete technical studies, project design, and stakeholder coordination for development of a new bridge and approximately three miles of new trail to connect two existing trails in the lower Rose Creek Watershed.

LOCATION: City of San Diego, San Diego County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Public Access

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Project Location

Exhibit 2: Site Maps and Photos

Exhibit 3: Project Support Letters

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31111 & 31400 – 31410 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed \$200,000 (two hundred thousand dollars) to the San Diego County Bicycle Coalition to complete technical studies, project design, and stakeholder coordination for a new bridge and approximately three miles of new trail to connect two existing trails in the lower Rose Creek Watershed, San Diego County. This authorization is subject to the condition that prior to the disbursement of any funds, the San Diego County Bicycle Coalition shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy a work program, budget, schedule, and the names of any contractors to be employed in carrying out the project.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the state's coastline.
 2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
 3. The proposed project will serve greater than local needs.
 4. The San Diego County Bicycle Coalition is a nonprofit organization existing under Section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, and whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.”
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PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends that the Conservancy authorize the disbursement of up to \$200,000 to the nonprofit organization the San Diego County Bicycle Coalition (“SDCBC”) to complete technical studies, project design, and stakeholder coordination for the Rose Creek Watershed Trail Connections Project (Project) in San Diego County. The project will design a new bridge and approximately three miles of new Class I multi-use trail to connect existing trails and improve railroad and creek crossings. These proposed key trail connections will result in approximately six contiguous miles of trail and would greatly enhance public access from the upper watershed to Mission Bay. This project was identified as a priority in the *Rose Creek Watershed Opportunities Assessment* (Assessment), a comprehensive analysis of opportunities and recommendations to enhance the natural, cultural, public safety, and recreation attributes of the Rose Creek Watershed (available at http://www.rosecreekwatershed.org/docs/opp_assessment/RCW_Chap3.pdf, § 3.5.2.).

The Rose Creek Watershed is located in the City of San Diego north of Mission Bay (Exhibit 1). The watershed offers a multitude of recreational opportunities for local residents and visitors. There are two large natural open space parks, the 467-acre Marian Bear Memorial Natural Park, south of highway 52 and the 312-acre Rose Canyon Open Space Park, north of highway 52. The watershed meets the ocean at the world-renowned Mission Bay Park, which is visited by fifteen million people per year. There are hiking, bicycling and jogging trails, and many opportunities to observe nature including three interpretive nature trails in the watershed.

While there are significant recreational opportunities available in the upper Rose Creek Watershed, pedestrian and bicycle access between Mission Bay and the upper watershed is difficult in places and at times unsafe. To travel from the inland neighborhoods to the coast, a cyclist or pedestrian must make difficult creek crossings and illegally cross the railroad tracks to join the existing Rose Canyon Bike Path. Currently the multiuse Class I Rose Canyon Bike Path ends just south of Highway 52 and users are directed onto a crowded public street with no bike lane for approximately three miles until that bike route re-joins the lower Rose Creek bike path (See Exhibit 2). The lower Rose Creek bike path is also a Class I multi-use trail that connects to Mission Bay Park. There are currently no identified railroad crossings in the Rose Creek Watershed open space system and, as a result, pedestrians and bicyclists are perilously crossing the tracks on a daily basis. These crossings have resulted in at least one recent death of a cyclist.

The Rose Creek Watershed is the only north/south transportation corridor in this vicinity that can, with the improvements proposed in this project, provide a safe and scenic non-automobile commuting route. Because the distances within the corridor are relatively short, improvements to bicycle safety and convenience create a strong incentive for bicycle riders to become commuters. While this project will provide benefits to walkers and cyclists within the watershed, it will also serve the larger regional goal of making an important trail connection for the Coastal Rail Trail, a 40-mile conceptual trail that will provide a commuting and recreation route from downtown San Diego to Oceanside along the railroad line.

In addition to the lack of pedestrian and bicycle access throughout the watershed, the watershed suffers from a number of problems including: poor water quality, habitat fragmentation, invasive plant species, homeless encampments, creek channelization, and development encroachments. This project will improve appreciation for riparian and stream habitat and public safety, as it will help bring the general public into an area that is now largely inaccessible. The inaccessibility of Rose Creek in the vicinity of the project, and the infestation of non-native plants, has created public safety problems resulting from illegal activities occurring in the creek. By implementing trail improvements, this project will put “eyes on the creek”, which the San Diego Police Department and SDCBC believe will lead to greater public understanding of the natural resources of the watershed and a revival of the project area.

The Assessment included preliminary studies of the watershed's natural and infrastructural resources, including the proposed trail. It provided preliminary analyses of both of the proposed bridge and the new trail segment (Exhibits 2 and 3). These studies concluded that the projects are technically feasible and provided conceptual alternatives. The next step, proposed in this project, is to use a stakeholder-driven process to take those concepts to a level where there is community and stakeholder consensus over the specific locations and design of the proposed trail. It is from that point that the trail can advance to environmental review, implementation and eventual construction.

The proposed project will include the analysis and conceptual design of a bicycle and pedestrian bridge over the Rose Canyon railroad tracks and under Interstate 5 and Highway 52, and approximately three miles of new trail paralleling Rose Creek. Specific tasks will include mapping, surveying, wetlands delineation, cultural resource surveys, conceptual designs, preliminary negotiation of encroachment permits, and facilitation of stakeholder involvement. The work products completed through this project will form the basis for subsequent California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) review and permit applications.

SDCBC is a local non-profit organization founded in 1987 that is dedicated to improving bicycling opportunities in San Diego. SDCBC has been involved with the creation and planning of the Rose Canyon Bike Path and the lower Rose Creek bike path. This would be the first grant that the Conservancy has made to the SDCBC, initiating an important partnership for the creation of bicycle friendly trails to and along the coast. Their staff has successfully managed five other grants and projects over the last ten years, in addition to participating in numerous local committees and planning processes. The SDCBC is a member of the Rose Creek Watershed Alliance, a watershed group that has fostered and promoted the development of the Rose Creek Watershed Trail.

Site Description: The project is located in the Rose Creek Watershed in the City of San Diego, San Diego County (Exhibit 1). The project site is approximately three miles long and connects from Highway 52 to Damon Street along Rose Creek. This reach of Rose Creek flows adjacent to Interstate 5 and is surrounded by urban development. As discussed above, the project area is a significant trail linkage, connecting communities to the north with Mission Bay and eventually downtown San Diego via the Coastal Rail Trail.

The 36-square mile watershed extends from Poway to Mission Bay. The upper watershed includes approximately two thirds of the Marine Corps Air Station at Miramar (MCAS Miramar) and the lower watershed includes the communities of Clairemont Mesa and University City. San Clemente and Rose Creeks are the watershed's major tributaries. These creeks converge to become Rose Creek, which meets the ocean at the 6.6-square mile Mission Bay Park. Mission Bay Park has an existing heavily-used trail that connects to the Coastal Trail. Over 100,000 people live and work in the watershed and millions visit it every year.

The Rose Creek Watershed contains great natural beauty, recreational opportunities and biological diversity. The ecological value of the undeveloped land in the watershed is in its diversity of native vegetation communities, which provide a wide variety of essential habitats, including those supporting endangered and threatened species. The watershed contains a large contiguous block of natural habitat (primarily Marine Corps Air Station Miramar) extending from the coast all the way to the desert. Unlike other coastal watersheds in Southern California that have been impacted by development on all sides, the watershed currently provides a large somewhat healthy corridor for wildlife movement and great potential for large scale habitat restoration and enhancement. The Rose Creek watershed is one of the largest watersheds draining into Mission Bay and serves as a wildlife corridor between the foothills south of Poway and Mission Bay.

Project History: The proposed project will implement several recommendations of the Assessment, which the Conservancy, in partnership with local partners, has been helping to develop and implement over the past five years. The Conservancy partially funded the development of the Assessment on August 14, 2003 and June 16, 2005. On October 21, 2008 the City of San Diego officially adopted the Assessment as City policy. On January 17, 2008 the Conservancy funded implementation of a recommendation of the Assessment, a detailed study of the hydrologic, hydraulic, sediment transport and geomorphic conditions of the watershed that will be used to develop restoration alternatives. This hydrology study will provide critical information for the design and location of the trail connections identified as part of this project.

The project is identified as a Tier II project on the Southern California Wetlands Recovery Project Work Plan.

PROJECT FINANCING:

<u>Coastal Conservancy</u>	<u>\$200,000</u>
Total Project Cost	\$200,000

The expected source of funds for this project is the FY 2008/2009 appropriation to the Conservancy from the Safe Neighborhood Parks, Clean Water, Clean Air, and Coastal Protection Bond Fund (Proposition 84). This funding may be expended, consistent with the Conservancy's enabling statutes, for the protection of San Diego Bay and adjacent watersheds as specified in Section 75060(f) of the Public Resources Code. Proposition 84 defines protection activities to include actions "necessary to allow the continued use and enjoyment of property or natural resources". (Pub. Res. Code § 75005(m)). As specified in Section 75072.6, "San Diego Bay and adjacent watersheds" includes the coastal and bay watersheds within San Diego County, such as the Rose Creek Watershed. The project is undertaken consistent with Chapters 3 and 9 of the Conservancy's enabling statute, as discussed below.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed funding authorization is consistent with Chapter 9 (Sections 31400-31405) of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code. Section 31400 states that the Conservancy shall have a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the state's coastline. The proposed action will help develop public trails that will connect inland communities to the coast at Mission Bay. Consistent with Section 31400.1, the proposed grant would provide funding to a non-profit organization to develop lands for public access purposes to the coast and serve the needs of the larger coastal community in San Diego County and beyond. Consistent with Section 31400.2, the proposed project cost has been evaluated in consideration of the total amount of available for coastal public accessway and urban waterfront projects, the fiscal resources of the grantee, the urgency of the project relative to other eligible projects, and the application of factors prescribed by the Conservancy for the purpose of determining project eligibility and priority (see discussion below). Consistent with Section 31400.3, the activities supported through the recommended grant to SDCBC are all directly related to the development and operation of a system of public accessways to and along the coast in order to meet the objectives of Division 21.

Section 31111 authorizes the Conservancy to fund and undertake plans and feasibility studies and to award grants to public agencies and nonprofit organizations for these purposes. The proposed project is consistent with the authority given in this section.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S 2007 STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

Consistent with **Goal 1, Objective E** of the Conservancy's 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed authorization would design regional trails along rivers and creeks to connect inland populations to the coast and expand recreational opportunities.

Consistent with **Goal 2 Objective 2A** the project will create plans to link and essentially create a watershed park, through the creation of a regional trail.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S
PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's current Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy's statutory programs and purposes:** See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
3. **Support of the public:** Implementation of the recommendations made in the Rose Creek Watershed Opportunities Assessment enjoys broad support of the public. Exhibit 3 provides support letters from State Senator Christine Kehoe, City of San Diego Councilmembers Donna Frye and Kevin Faulconer, the San Diego Association of Governments, and the Rose Creek Watershed Alliance.
4. **Location:** The project is located immediately outside the coastal zone in the City of San Diego. The project will undertake the planning necessary to establish a trail connecting upland communities to Mission Bay. Once constructed, this trail system will provide non-motorized access to one of San Diego's most popular coastal destinations thus benefiting coastal and ocean resources.
5. **Need:** The financial support and participation of the Conservancy are critical for the success of this project because SDCBC and the City of San Diego lack the financial resources to proceed with the planning effort.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** This project will increase trail connections to Mission Bay, which is visited by fifteen million visitors annually from all over the world. It is anticipated that this trail will be used by tourists, residents and commuters. Increasing public access into the rose Creek Watershed will also help develop interest in protecting and restoring it.
7. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The Project involves planning for a bridge and a trail connection along lower Rose Creek. Trail planning will evaluate potential vulnerability to sea level rise, accounting for sea level rise scenarios of 16 inches by 2050 and 55 inches by 2100.

Additional Criteria

8. **Urgency:** It is important to proceed with the trail planning simultaneously with the hydrological assessment, which has already begun, and the planning for the mid-coast

Trolley line to ensure that trail alignments are compatible with creek restoration and transit projects.

9. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The Rose Creek Watershed Trail will provide non-motorized public access from inland communities to the coast, which will help decrease greenhouse gas emissions by encouraging bicycle commuting. It will also provide recreational opportunities and will encourage the restoration of habitat and water quality by increasing public awareness.
13. **Readiness:** SDCBC and its consultants are ready to begin work immediately.
14. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** “See “Project History” above.”
15. **Cooperation:** The Rose Creek Watershed Alliance, an organization of community groups, will be a partner on this project and will help to organize stakeholder outreach and participation. This project will be a cooperative effort between a non-profit organization, the City of San Diego, and the community.
16. **Minimization of Greenhouse Gas Emissions:** This is a planning project which will not involve any direct emission of greenhouse gases. Indirect emissions associated with office emissions are de minimis. Planning will include approaches to minimize greenhouse gas emissions from construction of the trail.
17. **Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** The project will assess additional vulnerabilities from climate change impacts such as increased flooding in Rose Creek.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The project is located immediately outside the coastal zone in the City of San Diego (Exhibit 2), but it will provide trails which will lead to coastal trails. The Coastal Act specifically addresses public access. Public Resources Code Section 30210 mandates that:

In carrying out the requirements of Section 4 of Article X of the California Constitution, maximum access, which shall be conspicuously posted, and recreational opportunities shall be provided for all the people consistent with the public safety needs and the need to protect public rights, rights of private property owners and natural resource areas from overuse.

The trails planned under this project will increase the ability of pedestrians to reach coastal trails and other coastal amenities in the lower Rose Creek Watershed and Mission Bay. The City of San Diego’s certified Local Coastal Program (LCP) calls for maximum feasible public access to the coastal areas through use of coordinated linkages between pedestrian street crossings, pedestrian bridges, and an improved bikeway system.

While the project is located outside the coastal zone, the Pacific Beach Land Use Plan (LUP), a segment of the City of San Diego’s LCP, acknowledges the ecological importance of the Rose Creek watershed. The LUP calls for the development of the area adjacent to the Rose Creek floodway as a linear parkway with native riparian landscaping, pedestrian and bicycle paths.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The proposed project is statutorily exempt from the provisions of CEQA under 14 California Code of Regulations, Section 15262 exempting feasibility studies for possible future actions that the Conservancy has not yet approved, adopted or funded. Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon approval of the proposed authorization.