

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

April 27, 2006

RUSH RANCH NATURE AND EDUCATION CENTER

File No. 06-012

Project Manager: Ann Buell

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$500,000 to the Solano Land Trust for the construction of a nature and education center at Rush Ranch in Solano County.

LOCATION: Unincorporated Solano County on the northern edge of the Suisun Marsh (Exhibit 1).

PROGRAM CATEGORY: San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Project Location and Site Maps

Exhibit 2: Photographs

Exhibit 3: Letters of Support

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31000 *et seq.* of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed five hundred thousand dollars (\$500,000) to the Solano Land Trust for the construction of a nature and education center at Rush Ranch in Solano County.

This authorization is subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of any Conservancy funds, Solano Land Trust shall submit for review and written approval of the Executive Officer a detailed work program, budget and schedule; and the names and qualifications of any contractors and subcontractors that it intends to employ.
2. The Solano Land Trust shall enter into an agreement consistent with Section 31116(c) of the Public Resources Code, with the Conservancy, to protect the public’s interest in the constructed improvements at the project site.

3. The Solano Land Trust shall provide evidence that it has an endowment and/or other funding sources sufficient to operate and maintain the Rush Ranch Nature and Education Center. ”

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 Rush Ranch Nature and Education Center project is consistent with the purposes and criteria set forth in Public Resources Code Sections 31160-31165 regarding the Conservancy’s mandate to address the resource and recreation goals of the San Francisco Bay Area.
2. The Rush Ranch Nature and Education Center project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
3. The Solano Land Trust is a nonprofit organization existing under Section 501(c)(3) of the United States Internal Revenue Code, whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the California Public Resources Code.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff requests authorization to disburse up to \$500,000 to the Solano Land Trust (SLT) for the construction of a nature and education center at Rush Ranch in Solano County. The nature and education center will include a classroom with multimedia capability and view of Suisun Marsh, educational displays, basic kitchen facilities, decking, and a garden patio area featuring native plant species from the ranch. Attached restrooms and adjacent parking spaces will be designed and built in conformance with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). A series of interpretive signs will be posted along the wetland trail, funded by a matching grant from the San Francisco Estuary Project. These improvements to the existing infrastructure at Rush Ranch will increase public access to educational programs at the ranch, increase the number of school groups that will be able to use the site, expand the content of the programs that can be offered, and allow casual ranch visitors to learn about Suisun Marsh and other important natural resources and conservation work at Rush Ranch without being part of a formal program. Planning is well underway and construction is expected to begin this summer and be completed by the end of the year.

Rush Ranch is a 2,070-acre site located on the northern margin of Suisun Marsh and is owned and managed by SLT (see “Project History”). The ranch is located within both the primary and secondary management areas of the Suisun Marsh Protection Plan (1976) (Exhibit 1) but the Nature and Education Center will be constructed within the secondary management area. The natural features of the ranch include approximately 1,050 acres of brackish tidal wetland, 940 acres of grassland, and an 80-acre managed wetland. There are three public trails around the wetland and upland areas. Rush Ranch is a federally designated site for the San Francisco Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve (NERR), which is a partnership among the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration (NOAA), Solano Land Trust, State Department of

Parks and Recreation, San Francisco State University, and the Bay Conservation and Development Commission. NERR has donated \$500,000 in matching funds for this project.

Rush Ranch is an ideal location for a nature and education center, because of 1) its proximity to the growing urban population of Solano County, 2) its adjacency to one of the most important marshes in San Francisco Bay, 3) the successful track record of SLT in providing as much public access and education at Rush Ranch as the current facilities have allowed, 4) the need for better environmental education facilities in this region as evidenced by the seventeen strong letters of support (Exhibit 3), and 5) the presence of ongoing research and monitoring at the marsh site. The display area in the nature center will include posters on NERR scientist research topics. For example, current research includes:

- bird surveys (a Point Reyes Bird Observatory study on endangered rails)
- invasive species (Perennial Pepperweed (*Lepidium latifolium*))
- conservation of rare plants (Soft Bird's Beak (*Cordylanthus mollis spp. mollis*) re-introduction and study of pollinators of Suisun Thistle (*Cirsium hydrophilum*)), and
- the importance of monitoring (fish and bird populations)

The Nature and Education Center will be part of an existing complex of buildings and parking, including a blacksmith shop, a Sears 1932 kit house (which contains a small visitor center), a barn, water tower, working windmill, and old farm equipment (Exhibit 2). Current restroom facilities for the public are port-a-potties. The new one-story, 4,000 square-foot building is designed to be consistent with the architecture of the rest of the complex. To meet the research and stewardship needs of NERR, the new building will also include a field lab, office, and quarters for visiting scientists. To meet SLT's needs, living accommodations for a caretaker will be included to replace the old ranch house that will be torn down to make way for the new building. The Conservancy's funds would be applied primarily toward the nature and education center portion of the building, while sharing in other general construction and permitting costs as appropriate. Interpretive signs will be designed and posted along the wetland trail, funded by matching grant funds from the San Francisco Estuary Project.

SLT will incorporate "green design" into the building to reduce energy demands and conserve water, and will use recycled building materials. Because Rush Ranch has no public utilities, the project design includes installation of solar and wind energy systems and a back-up generator to produce 100% of the power requirements. Displays at the center will incorporate real-time information on energy use and other conservation measures at the ranch.

SLT purchased Rush Ranch in May 1988 with financial support from the Conservancy (see "Project History" below). The ranch is open to the public five days a week (Tues. – Sat.) and is managed for the enhancement of wetland and wildlife habitat, public education and recreational opportunities, and continued agricultural production. Approximately 2,000 elementary school children and perhaps an equal number of other visitors come to Rush Ranch on an annual basis. Horse-drawn carriage rides around the ranch are offered at no cost to persons with disabilities by Access Adventures. The Rush Ranch Educational Council (RREC) schedules educational programs for school children one day a week in the summer and fall. Other private and public groups and agencies are frequent visitors and strong supporters of the project, and many have expressed the need for better public access to the resources at Rush Ranch, as explained in the letters of support attached in Exhibit 3.

SLT is a nonprofit land trust incorporated in 1986. Its mission is to preserve and protect farmlands, wetlands, rangelands, open space, and wildlife habitat. It currently holds fee title or easements over more than 15,000 acres of Solano County lands. Key holdings include the King Ranch, Eastern Swett Ranch, Vallejo Swett Ranch, Rush Ranch, Lynch Canyon, and the Jepson Prairie Preserve. Regionally, Solano County ranks last among the nine Bay Area counties in land protection, with approximately 11 percent of its land protected to date.

Site Description: Rush Ranch is a 2,070-acre site located on the northern margin of the Suisun Marsh (Exhibit 1). It consists of approximately 1,050 acres of brackish tidal wetland, 940 acres of grassland, and an 80-acre managed wetland. It is accessible by Grizzly Island Road, which joins California State Highway 12 near Suisun City.

Rush Ranch includes a large staging area with an unpaved parking area, a small interpretive center and visitor's center, historic ranch buildings, a caretaker's residence and a system of well maintained trails (Exhibit 2). This area of the ranch is not considered environmentally sensitive because of long-standing development and use dating back to the mid-1800s when it was an active cattle, horse, and sheep ranch. Parts of the property are still grazed. All electricity is generated on site and a well is the only source of water.

The property contains the largest and most intact brackish tidal marsh system in the entire San Francisco estuary. The tidal marsh occupies 1,050 acres between Hill Slough on the north, Suisun Slough on the west, and Cutoff Slough on the south. The eastern margin is bordered by grasslands along the slopes of the Potrero Hills. This margin, managed by the SLT, creates an excellent managed buffer area surrounding the marsh. The Rush Ranch property is bordered by wildlife areas. On the north and west lie the Hill Slough Wildlife Area (1,112 acres) and the Peytonia Slough Ecological Reserve (1,887 acres) and on the south and southeast is the Joice Island Wildlife Area (1,887 acres); these particular properties are managed by the California Department of Fish and Game (Exhibit 1).

The brackish tidal marsh at this site is exceptionally rich in vegetation and wildlife. Since it has never been plowed, it presents the full spectrum of brackish tidal marsh plant communities in a largely undisturbed setting. Threatened, endangered or rare plants and animals include the Suisun marsh aster, the Suisun thistle, the Delta tule pea, Mason's *Lilaeopsis*, California clapper rail, California black rail, salt marsh yellowthroat, salt marsh song sparrow, salt marsh harvest mouse, Suisun shrew, and river otters.

Project History: In 1988, the Conservancy approved the Rush Ranch Enhancement Plan and authorized a \$1,507,500 grant to the Solano County Farmlands and Open Space Foundation (later renamed the "Solano Land Trust") for the acquisition of Rush Ranch and the development of a management plan. The Rush Ranch Management Plan was completed in 1989 and approved by the Bay Conservation and Development Commission (BCDC), Suisun Resource Conservation District, and the California Department of Fish and Game in 1990. The main elements of the plan were wetland, creek, and spring enhancement; management of grazing and upland grasslands; protection of cultural resources; and increased public access and recreation. The public access and recreation element included development of gravel parking areas, an interpretive program focused on the marsh, and a trail system consisting of three loop trails with overlooks and wildlife viewing blinds, among other improvements. In June 1990, the Conservancy awarded the Solano County Farmlands and Open Space Foundation \$444,147 to implement the Rush Ranch

Management Plan in a manner consistent with the Suisun Marsh Protection Plan and the Suisun Marsh Preservation Act.

This proposed project will build on these past Conservancy investments by greatly expanding the opportunities for public education about the Suisun Marsh and other natural and cultural resources of the site and by extending these opportunities to persons with limited mobility, thanks to the addition of the ADA-compliant restrooms and parking area.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$500,000
National Estuarine Research Reserve	500,000
PG&E	7,500
Rob Schonholtz Memorial	7,450
San Francisco Estuary Project	8,000
Anonymous donation of endowment	250,000
In-kind	<u>135,092</u>
Total Project Cost	\$1,408,042

The expected source of Conservancy funds is the “Water Security, Clean Drinking Water, Coastal and Beach Protection Fund of 2002” (Proposition 50), which allocates some Conservancy funds specifically for “the acquisition and development of facilities to promote public access to and participation in the conservation of land, water and wildlife resources.” Eligible projects include training and research facilities for watershed protection and water conservation including “nature centers that are in or adjacent to watersheds and wetlands.”

The \$500,000 matching grant from NERR may be used for any part of the larger project. To ensure that they will have enough funds to maintain the new facility, SLT has embarked on a fundraising campaign for maintenance, operation, and the enhancement of natural resources at Rush Ranch. SLT received a \$250,000 donation in February of this year with another pledge for \$200,000 provided SLT receives matching funds. The donor has stated that he desires the entire \$450,000 to be matched and dedicated to Rush Ranch.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

This project is undertaken pursuant to Chapter 4.5 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Public Resources Code Section 31160-31165, to address resource and recreation goals in the San Francisco Bay Area. In particular, the Conservancy may award grants to improve public access to the bay through the provision of facilities such as interpretive centers and staging areas (Section 31162(a)); to assist in the implementation of the adopted plans of local governments and special districts (Section 31162(c)); and promote, assist, and enhance projects that provide open space and natural areas that are accessible to urban populations for recreational and educational purposes (Section 31162(d)).

This project is appropriate for prioritization under the selection criteria set forth in Section 31163(c) in that (1) it is supported by adopted local or regional plans, such as the Suisun Marsh

Protection Plan (Dec. 1976); the federally-approved management plan for the San Francisco Bay National Estuarine Research Reserve (the plan is embedded in the “Final Environmental Impact Statement, Final Management Plan,” July 2002, as Section 3.0); the Land Use and Circulation Element of the Solano County General Plan (Dec. 1980, as amended through Dec. 2004); the City of Fairfield General Plan, Open Space Element (2002); and the City of Suisun City General Plan, Open Space Element (1992); (2) it includes multi-jurisdictional participation from federal, state, county, and city agencies, special districts, the Bay Conservation and Development Commission, and serves a regional constituency from the north San Francisco Bay and beyond; (3) can be implemented in a timely way because of the strong support from all jurisdictions and the planning that has already been completed; and (4) includes matching funds from other sources as described under "Project Financing" above.

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

Consistent with **Goal 11, Objective A** of the Conservancy's Strategic Plan, the proposed project will implement a new and expanded facility that will increase public access to educational programs and interpretation at Rush Ranch.

Consistent with **Goal 11, Objective D** of the Conservancy's Strategic Plan, the proposed authorization will implement a project that includes ADA-compliant elements, including restrooms and parking facilities.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, 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:** This project has received an exceptionally high level of support, with 17 letters from legislators, public agencies and special districts, educational institutions from grade school through public universities and community colleges, and many non-profit organizations (Exhibit 3). Letters emphasize the need for increased public access to this site at the edge of the Suisun Marsh.
4. **Location:** The proposed project is in the secondary protection area of the Suisun Marsh Protection Plan. The nature and education center and associated research facility will further conservation activities at the Suisun Marsh by the Solano Land Trust and participating organizations, agencies, and the general public.
5. **Need:** The Solano Land Trust does not have sufficient funding to carry out this project without partial funding support from the Conservancy.

6. **Greater-than-local interest:** This project will serve not only educators and students from around Solano County, but also research scientists working in cooperation with the National Estuarine Research Reserve at Rush Ranch.

Additional Criteria

8. **Resolution of more than one issue:** Rush Ranch will be able to accommodate more students on more days of the year, visitors with disabilities will have accessible restrooms and parking area, casual visitors will have access to education about the Suisun Marsh without having to rely on a special event.
9. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
11. **Innovation:** The building that will result from this project will serve multiple purposes made possible by an innovative design. Solar and wind-generated energy will provide power and be part of the education to be gained at the site. National and state researchers focused on the Suisun Marsh will have accommodations for overnight stays and a wet lab, and day users will have a classroom and nature room to set the stage for natural history lessons related to the wetlands at the Ranch.
12. **Readiness:** The project is already underway, thanks to the funding from the National Estuarine Research Reserve (NERR), and much of the planning is complete.
13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** In addition to the prior Conservancy goals discussed in “Project History,” above, this project helps to meet the Bay Program’s goal of providing as much support as possible for high priority projects in Solano County because of the importance of its biological resources (in particular Suisun Marsh and the vernal pools) and the threat of development in high priority areas. Additionally, the Bay Program strives to support all nine Bay Area counties equitably and yet has had fewer opportunities to fund projects in Solano County than in any of the other counties.
15. **Cooperation:** The Solano Land Trust, owner of Rush Ranch, has entered into a Memorandum of Understanding with the California Department of Parks and Recreation, San Francisco State University, and the San Francisco Bay Conservation and Development Commission as an expression of intent for cooperative management of the Rush Ranch NERR (2003). The memorandum directs site activities to include “promoting on-site research and long-term monitoring, engaging local communities in stewardship activities that support the conservation of sensitive reserve resources, and acting as a regional education resource that serves the public of the San Francisco Bay and Delta Region.”

CONSISTENCY WITH SUISUN MARSH PROTECTION PLAN AND SOLANO COUNTY'S LOCAL PROTECTION PLAN:

Land use and resource management in Suisun Marsh are controlled by the Suisun Marsh Preservation Act of 1977, which implements the recommendations of the Suisun Marsh Protection Plan, completed in 1976 by the Bay Conservation and Development Commission (BCDC). The Suisun Marsh Preservation Act requires the preparation by local governments of Local Protection Programs in which local ordinances are brought into conformity with the Act.

This project is consistent with the following policies in Solano County's Local Protection Program:

Recreation Land Use

1. Within the Suisun Marsh, provision should be made for public and private recreational development to allow for public recreation and access to the marsh for such uses as fishing, hunting, boating, picnicking, hiking and nature study.
2. Recreational uses in the marsh should be located on the outer portions near population centers and easily accessible from existing roads.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

This project involves the construction of internal office space, living space, and educational and visitor facilities in an already constructed office park in addition to the purchase and installation of educational equipment and displays. The existing structure at this site will be demolished and the new building will be erected in the footprint of the existing building and its yard, neither of which is located in an environmentally sensitive area. The County of Solano, acting as the lead agency under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), found that these activities are categorically exempt from CEQA under 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15301, regarding the operation and minor alteration of existing facilities involving negligible or no expansion of use. Conservancy staff has determined that the project is categorically exempt under 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15302 regarding replacement of existing structures, and Section 15303 regarding accessory structures (the addition of the patio/garden). Upon approval of this project, staff will file a Notice of Exemption for the project.

This project is receiving \$500,000 in matching funds from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration's (NOAA) National Estuarine Research Reserve (NERR) system. NERR has reviewed the project under the National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) and found that it qualifies for a categorical exclusion, Minor Project Activities, NAO 216-6.