

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

June 29, 2006

**HAMMOND COASTAL TRAIL: WIDOW WHITE CREEK TRAIL
AND BYPASS CONSTRUCTION**

File No. 04-007-02

Project Manager: Su Corbaley

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$700,000 to the Redwood Community Action Agency to construct a section of the Hammond Coastal Trail connecting the northern and southern segments of the trail between Letz Avenue and Murray Road in McKinleyville, County of Humboldt.

LOCATION: West of Highway 1, between Letz Avenue and Murray Road, and along Widow White Creek, adjacent to the Mad River Estuary in McKinleyville, Humboldt County (Exhibit 1)

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Public Access

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Project Location

Exhibit 2: Site Map

Exhibit 3: Landowner Letter of Intent to Sell Easement

Exhibit 4: CEQA Documentation

Exhibit 5: 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 seven hundred thousand dollars (\$700,000) to the Redwood Community Action Agency to construct a segment of the Hammond Coastal Trail to include the Widow White Creek pedestrian interpretive corridor trail and bypass trail for the purpose of connecting its northern and southern segments and creating 5.5 miles of continuous trail from Clam Beach County Park to the Mad River, subject condition that, prior to disbursement of these funds, the Executive Officer shall approve in writing:

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1. A work plan, budget and schedule, and any contractors to be used for the activities funded under this authorization.
2. A detailed signing plan consistent with the sign guidelines for projects funded by the Safe Neighborhoods, Parks, Clean Water, Clean Air and Coastal Protection Bond Fund (Proposition 12).
3. Evidence that the county has secured all property rights necessary to construct and operate the trail.
4. Evidence that all permits necessary to this project have been issued.
5. An agreement or agreements to protect public interest that shall be entered into and recorded in Humboldt County, consistent with Public Resources Code Section 31116(c)."

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 Hammond Trail project is consistent with the purposes and criteria set forth in Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
3. The Conservancy has reviewed the Negative Declaration and the Mitigation Monitoring Program (attached to the accompanying staff recommendation as Exhibit 4) adopted by the Humboldt County Board of Supervisors on June 27, 2006 pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act, and finds that the project avoids, reduces or mitigates the possible significant environmental effects to a level of insignificance, and that there is no substantial evidence that the trail construction activities along Widow White Creek may have a significant effect on the environment, as defined in 14 Cal. Code Regulations Section 15382.
4. The proposed project will serve greater than local needs."

PROJECT SUMMARY:

The proposed authorization would enable the Redwood Community Action Agency (RCAA) to construct approximately 2,200 feet of the Hammond Coastal Trail in McKinleyville, Humboldt County. Design and planning were conducted under a 2004 Conservancy grant to RCAA. The proposed project would be completed in 2006 and 2007.

The Hammond Trail runs along a portion of the abandoned Little River and Hammond Railroad properties. The railroad line originally traveled from the North Spit of Humboldt Bay around the north side of the bay to Crannell (between McKinleyville and Trinidad), but never connected as far to the east as Arcata or as far south as Eureka and Fortuna. As part of the California Coastal Trail, the Hammond Trail is designed for non-motorized commuter travel as well as recreational use, and provides the only north-south access over the Mad River west of State Route 101. At present, the Hammond Trail consists of two discontinuous segments constructed in three phases

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between 1982 and 1997, extending from Clam Beach County Park to Letz Avenue and from Murray Road to the Mad River (Exhibit 2). Between these two segments is a nearly one-half mile gap known locally in Humboldt County as the “Hole in the Hammond.” Filling the Hole in the Hammond will enable RCAA to achieve a longstanding goal for Humboldt County and the Conservancy: the trail segments and allowing visitors and commuters to travel uninterrupted for 5.5 miles along the coast.

The proposed project would include constructing two trails to complete the Hammond Coastal Trail: an interpretive low-impact trail adjacent to the Widow White Creek for pedestrian-only use during low water flow season, and a hard-paved year-round use trail that bypasses the creek for heavier impact users such as bicyclists and equestrians, as well as pedestrians during high water flow season. The bypass trail is planned to extend from Letz Avenue south to Murray Road within a Caltrans longitudinal encroachment along the west side of Highway 1. At Murray Road the bypass would turn west to connect with the existing southern segment of the Hammond Coastal Trail (Exhibit 2).

The Pedestrian Interpretive Trail along Widow White Creek would begin on property owned by McKinleyville Community Services District and continue within a Humboldt County easement adjacent to the creek. Widow White Creek drains to the Mad River Estuary, and flows perennially, supporting a healthy coastal riparian system of alder and willow, and steelhead and Coho salmon habitat. In December 2004, the California Coastal Commission approved an amendment to Humboldt County’s Local Coastal Plan to allow for development of foot trails within streamside management areas; Widow White Creek is designated a Streamside Management Area (see discussion under “Consistency with Local Coastal Program Policies”).

The planning phase of the project was carried out by RCAA in consultation with the County of Humboldt Public Works and Natural Resources Department. Both agencies worked with the McKinleyville Community Services District to design the creek trail, and with Cal-Trans to design the bypass. The County has completed the trail engineering elements and submitted them to Cal-Trans for issuance of a longitudinal encroachment permit for the bypass segment; the County expects to receive that permit from Cal-Trans soon. Further, an adjacent property owner is supportive of the trail development and has indicated willingness to initiate sale of a trail easement across a portion of its property to complete the bypass trail once construction funding is secured (see Exhibit 3).

RCAA, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization based in Humboldt County, has been integrally involved in the construction of the Hammond Trail for many years, and has worked extensively with the County and the Community Services District to plan for this project.

Project History: The Conservancy has worked for 28 years to assist with the development of the Hammond Trail:

- In 1978, the Conservancy awarded \$17,500 to Humboldt County to acquire the abandoned Hammond Railroad right-of-way between Murray Road and Clam Beach;
- In May 1982, the Conservancy awarded \$296,000 to Humboldt County to renovate an abandoned railroad bridge across the Mad River for use by hikers, bicyclists, and equestrians;
- In April 1987, the Conservancy awarded \$105,000 to the County to construct a one-mile extension from Hiller Road to Kelly Avenue; and awarded \$108,500 to RCAA to extend the

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trail between Knox Cove (near Kelly Avenue) to Murray Road, then north toward Widow White Creek (which RCAA completed by 1995), and to conduct a feasibility analysis of additional northward extension to Clam Beach County Park;

- In May 1997, the Conservancy awarded \$76,000 to RCAA to extend the trail another 2.25 miles north through Clam Beach County Park; and
- In June 2002, the Conservancy awarded \$71,000 to RCAA to plan and design a southern extension of the trail from the Mad River Bridge and to stabilize approximately 780 linear feet of Widow White Creek stream bank along the proposed interpretive trail corridor.
- In March 2004, the Conservancy awarded \$100,000 (later augmented to \$115,000) to RCAA to design the trail routes and prepare the environmental review documentation for trail construction.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$700,000
Matching contributions:	
Trail easements (Humboldt County)	15,000
RCAA*	516,000
Subtotal:	<u>1,231,000</u>
Total Conservancy Cost	\$700,000

The Conservancy's contribution to this project is expected to come from the FY 2005 appropriation from the Safe Neighborhoods, Parks, Clean Water, Clean Air and Coastal Protection Bond Fund (Proposition 12) allocated for projects north of the Gualala River. Consistent with Proposition 12 requirements, the project will incorporate required signage. It also has potential air quality benefits, through the provision of bicycle and pedestrian alternatives to automotive travel.

*RCAA has applied for a grant of \$516,000 from the California River Parkways Grant Program to complete the construction phase of this segment of the Hammond Coastal Trail; the project has cleared the application screening and site-review phases with a final award decision expected June 2006.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 9 (Sections 31400 *et seq.*) of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code. Section 31400 states the Legislature's intent that the Conservancy have a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the state's coastline. The goal of the proposed project is to connect the existing portions of the Hammond Coastal Trail, resulting in 5.5 miles of continuous California Coastal Trail. The proposed funding authorization is thus consistent with §31400.

Section 31400.3 authorizes the Conservancy to aid nonprofit organizations in establishing a system of public coastal accessways. RCAA, which will carry out the proposed project, is a private nonprofit organization existing under Section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, having among its principal charitable purposes the conservation of land for scientific,

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educational, scenic, or open space opportunities. RCAA has been instrumental in the design and development of the Hammond Trail, a segment of the California Coastal Trail, and the proposed funding authorization will assist RCAA in completing this effort, consistent with this section.

The proposed project is also consistent with §31408(a), directing the Conservancy to coordinate the development of the California Coastal Trail, and §31409, which authorizes the Conservancy to award grants and provide assistance to establish and expand inland trail systems that may be linked to the California Coastal Trail.

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

Consistent with **Goal 1 Objective C** of the Conservancy's Strategic Plan, the proposed project will increase newly constructed and improved Public Accessway opportunities by constructing 2,200 feet of the California Coastal Trail, thereby connecting two currently noncontiguous trail segments and resulting in 5.5 miles of continuous trail.

**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 broad public support and is endorsed by Senator Wesley Chesbro, Assemblymember Patty Berg, the McKinleyville Community Services District, the Humboldt Bay Bicycle Commuters Association, the Friends of the Hammond Trail, and individual members of the public. See letters of support in Exhibit 5.
4. **Location:** The project would be located within the coastal zone of McKinleyville, County of Humboldt. The Hammond Coastal Trail is part of the California Coastal Trail, from Clam Beach to the Mad River. The proposed project will facilitate connecting the northern and southern portions of the Hammond Coastal Trail at the gap known as the "Hole in the Hammond" from Letz Avenue to Murray Road.
5. **Need:** Presently, trail users must limit their use to either existing segment of the trail because there is no reasonable means for all users to travel the Hole in the Hammond. The project would fill the gap and would result in 5.5 miles of continuous coastal access from Clam Beach County Park south to the Mad River Bridge.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** Humboldt County, with its beautiful scenery of vast beaches and panoramic bluffs and mountains, is a recreational destination for many visitors from within the State and the nation, particularly given its proximity to several State and National

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parks and recreation areas (e.g., Humboldt Redwoods State Park, Redwood National Park). Furthermore, the ocean and rivers serve the student population drawn to Humboldt State University. To promote the Hammond Coastal Trail to visitors, RCAA has published a free brochure that contains general information for visitors about some of the exciting features found along the trail, and the trail's popularity is evidenced by its selection as the "Best Place to Ride a Bike" and the "Second Best Place to Walk or Jog," in the 1997 Eureka Times Standard's annual "Best of the North Coast" poll. The proposed project thus has regional, state, and national interest.

Additional Criteria

11. **Innovation:** This project provides a unique opportunity to develop a pedestrian trail within a natural ecosystem and exhibit interpretive (e.g., natural history, system ecology, botany) and educational information about the system for the Visitor. Widow White Creek supports sensitive salmonid species - steelhead trout and Coho and providing interpretive information about these species' life-needs offers an excellent educational opportunity to local schools and visitors unfamiliar with the salmonids' special habitat requirements.
12. **Readiness:** The RCAA and the County are poised to carry out the proposed project, and have garnered widespread support and participation (see the "Project Support" section above).
13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** The Conservancy has a long history of assisting development of the Hammond Trail, as detailed under the "Project History" section above. This action would further existing goals for the Hammond Trail project specifically, and for public access in the region generally, as well as helping the planning and development of the California Coastal Trail.
15. **Cooperation:** The proposed project is another example of the cooperative effort among the Conservancy, RCAA, and the County to develop the Hammond Coastal Trail.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

This project is consistent with the *Humboldt County General Plan, Volume II, McKinleyville Area Plan of the Humboldt County Local Coastal Program* (certified January 7, 1982), Section 4.54, which recommends improvement to the existing trail along Widow White Creek to accommodate pedestrian and equestrian travel. This section further states that the development of the California Coastal Trail should follow recommendations of the adopted County Trails Plan, which in turn indicates that in the McKinleyville Planning Area the trail would follow the old Hammond Railroad right-of-way to the Mad River.

On August 27, 2002, the Humboldt County Board of Supervisors approved an amendment to its General Plan, including the McKinleyville LCP, to add "public access trails" to the list of allowable uses within Streamside Management Areas (Widow White Creek is a designated Streamside Management Area), so long as the uses are found to be consistent with the Coastal Act. At its December 2004 meeting, the California Coastal Commission approved Humboldt County LCP Amendment No. HUM-MAJ-1-03, which amended the County's Local Coastal Program Riparian Corridor Standards, to allow for public trail use in designated Streamside Management Areas.

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Constructing a Hammond Coastal Trail link from Letz Avenue to Murray Road will result in trail augmentation and use, will add to the establishment of foot trails along the Widow White Creek, and will follow the proposed Coastal Trail layout in the Trails Plan. This project is thus consistent with and will facilitate the implementation of the relevant portions of the Humboldt County General Plan for the City of McKinleyville.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The proposed authorization involves the construction of two distinct paths that will connect the northern and southern termini of the Hammond Coastal Trail, each providing distinct uses and experiences. The Widow White Creek Interpretive Trail segment will allow for pedestrian-only use along the riparian corridor of Widow White Creek, while the multi-use Bypass segment will parallel Highway 101 between Letz Avenue and Murray Road.

The Bypass trail will be a multi-use trail for pedestrians, bicyclists, and equestrians and will be accessible to people with disabilities. The bypass will be located within a Cal-Trans right-of-way and within a sewer line easement owned by McKinleyville Community Services District, and on a (soon to be) County-owned easement. The construction of the bypass will involve minor grading to level the surface, paving, placement of safety fencing, signage and landscaping.

The construction of the Widow White Creek Interpretive Trail will involve use of hand tools to establish the trail, remove unwanted casual trails, and install low-profile directional fencing and signage. A footbridge will be installed that will involve the use of machinery. The trail along the stream will be approximately 6 feet wide and will be constructed along the hill slope within the riparian canopy using a standard cut-and-fill approach, in which a series of flat benches are formed by excavating the upslope side and using the excavated soil to fill the down slope side. Construction will require the excavation of a total of approximately 2,150 cubic yards of ground material; approximately 1,420 cubic feet of this material will be used as fill. The excess material will be disposed of at an approved off-site location. The surface of the trail will be finished with compacted gravel. The construction of the trail will require the removal of under story and some small (less than six inches in diameter) trees. Straw will be placed on new slopes that become bare due to construction activities. Stem cuttings of native plants will be planted on newly created slopes. The majority of the removed vegetation will be transplanted at other locations along the trail. The trail will be constructed above the ordinary high water level of the creek and at a distance of anywhere from 20 feet to over 100 feet from the active channel of the creek.

A pre-fabricated fiberglass bridge will be installed to cross Widow White Creek. The 60-foot span is designed so that the bridge will be situated well above the banks. The installation of the bridge will not involve work in the stream channel and will not require excavation or fill placement within the creek banks. The bridge will be transported to the crossing site via an existing access road.

The project is subject to the requirements of the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). In 2002, Humboldt County determined that construction of the Bypass trail that parallels Highway 101 is categorically exempt from CEQA under California Code of Regulations Title 14 Section 15304, which exempts from CEQA projects that involve only minor alterations of land, including the the creation of bicycle lanes on existing rights-of-way. The County filed a Notice of Exemption with County Clerk on October 25, 2002, in support of its determination, as lead agency, that this project is exempt (Exhibit 4). Staff concur with that determination.

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More recently, as the lead agency for the Hammond Coastal Trail construction project under CEQA, Humboldt County prepared an Initial Study and proposed Negative Declaration for the Widow White Creek Interpretive Trail (Exhibit 4). The State Clearinghouse circulated the document for a 30-day public comment on May 22, 2006. The state received no comments during the comment period that ended on June 20, 2006. On June 27, 2006, Humboldt County adopted the negative declaration for the construction of the Hammond Coastal Trail, Widow White Creek Interpretive Trail.

The Conservancy is acting as a CEQA responsible agency with respect to the project. Staff has reviewed the Negative Declaration, which discusses potential environmental impacts of the project. The project was determined to have potential impacts of less than significant impact and less than significant with mitigation incorporation. Changes in project design or mitigation measures were incorporated to reduce impacts to a less-than-significant level in the areas of biological resources, geology and soils, and hydrology and water quality. The following is a summary of the potential impacts and mitigation measures for each of the foregoing categories.

- With respect to biological resources, potential impacts to fish, plants, and wetlands were identified. However, the project will not cause a significant cumulative effect because project is designed to avoid certain trees, transplant removed vegetation, and remove unwanted casual trails to direct foot traffic to the intended trail thereby increasing the quality of available habitat. The project will be implemented to avoid short-term adverse impacts through mitigation measures such:
 - (Plants): avoiding sensitive plants during construction and the placement of permanent protective fencing to avoid long term impacts.
 - (Fish): restricting field work to late summer during low flow conditions, and completing all work before October 15, when fish migrations typically begin; keeping construction activities out of the creek; use of erosion control measures to prevent sediment from entering the creek.
 - (Wetlands): limiting all construction activities to above top-of-bank at the site of the footbridge installation, which is located away from any areas with potential wetland characteristics.
- With respect to geology and soils, a potential impact from erosion or loss of topsoil was identified. However, the effects will not pose a significant threat due to mitigation measures including conducting the majority of the work with hand tools to reduce soil disturbance, and utilizing appropriate sediment control measures such as mulching, planting, and silt fencing.
- Potential impacts to water quality were also identified. Design measures incorporated to mitigate the potential for significant impacts include installing a bridge crossing to avoid potential contamination of creek water by human foot contact; including a 20-foot wide buffer of undisturbed vegetation between the creek and the trail; the use of hand tools to minimize ground disturbance and erosion; use of sediment barriers to control loss rock and debris from entering the creek; limiting work to late summer, low flow period, and revegetation and mulching any disturbed riparian areas.

With these changes and mitigations, staff believes that the potentially significant effects will be

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reduced to a level of insignificance. The required mitigations will be monitored through a Mitigation Program (Exhibit 4), consistent with Public Resources Code Section 21081.6. Specifically, the reporting program requires that all of the mitigation measures outlined in the Mitigated Negative Declaration will be reviewed with field staff prior to trail construction, and that the mitigation measure be periodically monitored during construction. The mitigated effects of trail construction activities will not contribute to adverse environmental impacts that are cumulatively significant.

Staff therefore recommends that the Conservancy find that the project, as mitigated, will not have a significant effect on the environment.

Upon approval, staff will file a Notice of Determination for the project.