

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

June 29, 2006

MENDOCINO COUNTY COASTAL TRAIL PROGRAM, PHASE 1

File No. 06-051

Project Manager: Sheila Semans

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$200,000 to the Mendocino Land Trust (MLT) to prepare phase 1 of the Mendocino County Coastal Trail Plan.

LOCATION: Coastal Mendocino County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Public Access and Coastal Restoration

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Project Location and Site Map

Exhibit 2: SCC Navarro Headlands property map

Exhibit 3: Letters of Support

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31400 *et seq.* of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed two hundred thousand dollars (\$200,000) to the Mendocino Land Trust to develop Phase 1 of the Mendocino County Coastal Trail Plan, as described in the accompanying staff recommendation, subject to the condition that prior to disbursement of any funds, the Executive Officer of the Conservancy shall approve in writing a work plan, budget and schedule, and any contractors to be employed in these tasks.”

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 project is consistent with Chapter 5 of Division 21 (§§31200-31215) and Chapter 9 of Division 21 (§§31400-31409) of the Public Resources Code regarding coastal restoration and public access.

2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
 3. The proposed project will serve greater than local needs.
 4. The Mendocino Land Trust is a private nonprofit organization existing under the provisions of Section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, and its purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.”
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PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize disbursement of up to \$200,000 to the Mendocino Land Trust (MLT) to plan for the California Coastal Trail (CCT) in Mendocino County. This project will result in completion of Phase 1 of the Mendocino County Coastal Trail Plan that will begin the process to identify, describe, design and map (where appropriate) a strategy for achieving a continuous coastal trail throughout the county. MLT will look at the county in its entirety and determine a feasible CCT routing concept on both public and private lands. Building off recommendations outlined in their *Mendocino County Coastal Conservation Plan* (funded by the Conservancy and completed in April 2003), and the Conservancy’s Coastal Trail Plan, MLT will evaluate the CCT needs at three different scales: 1) conceptual level planning for new CCT segments not yet investigated, focusing first on possible connectors to public lands; 2) assessment of CCT segments on public lands in partnership with agency landowners (primarily the Department of Parks and Recreation (DPR)) resulting in priority recommendations for development/improvements to the CCT; and 3) detailed planning and design on CCT segments already identified. These three components are described in more detail below.

Investigate “connectors” to fill the gaps in the Mendocino County CCT

Focusing initially on the access priorities identified in the *Mendocino County Coastal Conservation Plan*, MLT will contact landowners and determine the feasibility of developing new trail segments. With interested landowners, MLT will determine the property interest needed to acquire these new trail segments (donation, easement, or fee acquisition) and recommend a conceptual plan for long-term ownership and management. Where there is sufficient interest from the landowner, MLT will develop initial plans that characterize the access needs, natural resource issues, and/or private landowner constraints, and determine the appropriate nature of the trail needed (e.g. informal path vs. ADA-accessible paved multi-purpose walk). If appropriate, GIS maps of the trail will be developed in coordination with Coastwalk.

Developing/improving the CCT on public lands

In partnership with state and federal agencies, community organizations, and non-profits, MLT will investigate the CCT needs on public lands in Mendocino County. DPR is the largest holder of public lands along the coast, and has been an active partner in the development of this proposal. Chronically understaffed and under funded, DPR is having difficulty opening new CCT segments on newly acquired properties and in maintaining existing trails and facilities on older properties. MLT will assess these needs and make priority recommendations about vital trail projects. MLT will focus initially on sites that are current or former Conservancy projects,

including Glass Beach, Big River, Caspar Headlands, and the Point Cabrillo Light Station Preserve.

Detailed planning at Navarro Headlands and Noyo Headlands/Glass Beach

There are currently two areas where CCT planning is farther along in development and MLT will engage in detailed planning at these sites: Navarro Headlands and the Noyo Headlands/Glass Beach area.

In the Navarro area, MLT is looking at a variety of ways to connect the Navarro Headlands (the 55-acres of coastal bluff purchased with Conservancy funding in 1999 and now owned by MLT) with the Campbell/Patrick offer-to-dedicate (one of 15 new OTDs MLT is working to open as part of the Mendocino Coastal Access Program, funded last year by the Conservancy) which would result in nearly 2 miles of CCT. MLT has already engaged the adjacent landowners, begun negotiations on possible donations or acquisitions of trail easements, and identified what improvements would be needed to create a contiguous trail. In this segment, MLT will complete any needed real estate transactions (unless additional funds are needed for acquisition), plan for parking (working with CalTrans), perform any surveys needed (e.g. botanical, archeological, geologic), create GIS maps of the trail corridor, and obtain permits/complete CEQA for a bridge needed to cross a creek. MLT will develop construction-level plans for the trail and any needed improvements, and will provide cost estimates for construction.

Included in this area is a one acre parcel that was acquired by the Conservancy in 1985, in anticipation of a coastal restoration plan for the highly scenic headland. Fronting directly on the west side of highway one (Exhibit 2) the property was originally purchased as phase one of a larger lot consolidation project, conceived of to avoid a regulatory fight over development in that area. The larger project never materialized, and the property has remained open space ever since. The Mendocino County Coastal Land Use Plan (Chapter 4, Section 4.9 covering the Dark Gulch to Navarro River planning area) designates this area as “highly scenic”, and “especially important because it is many visitors' introduction to the Mendocino coast.” Any effort to develop the site for residential use would be met by strong opposition from the local community, and likely from the Coastal Commission and the County. The Conservancy was unable to acquire other parcels on the headland, but did assist MLT in its acquisition of the 55-acre Navarro Headland property in 1999. Since the coastal restoration project originally envisioned for this area never materialized, the property’s greatest value to the Conservancy now appears to be for development of the Coastal Trail. The Phase 1 Coastal Trail Plan for Mendocino County may serve instead as the coastal restoration plan, pursuant to which the Conservancy property could be transferred to MLT with a conservation easement and developed as part of the CCT.

A unique partnership has formed to develop the CCT in the Glass Beach/Noyo Headlands (former Georgia-Pacific Mill Site property) area. After obtaining a grant through the National Park Service (NPS) Rivers, Trails and Conservation Assistance program to design the CCT on the Noyo Headlands, the City of Fort Bragg recognized an opportunity to not only design a consistent trail, but also improve the interface between the Headlands and Glass Beach State Park. Forming a design team with the Conservancy, DPR, MLT and NPS, the City has initiated an intensive planning process to address CCT needs for the community, regardless of ownership. The City will take the lead on the Noyo section of the project, and because of their history of

involvement with the Glass Beach property, MLT will take the lead for that section. This segment is particularly important from a larger, landscape perspective: to the south, the City has improved the CCT at Pomo Bluffs and widened the Noyo Bridge to include safe pedestrian access. North of Glass Beach, DPR is working to improve the Pudding Creek trestle bridge, and the Conservancy recently awarded DPR funds to improve the MacKerricher State Park haul road leading into MacKerricher State Park. Once all these pieces are completed, Fort Bragg residents - who have historically not even been able to see most of their waterfront - will have access to over 10 miles of beautiful, continuous coastal trail.

The Mendocino Land Trust is uniquely positioned to assess the specific routing of the CCT in Mendocino County based on 30 years of planning, land acquisition and management, and coastal access development. The *Mendocino County Coastal Conservation Plan* has been held up as a model for land trusts throughout the county, and the Big River Preliminary Management Plan (completed in 2005 with support from the Conservancy) is currently guiding the management of this important estuary. Additionally, all of the coastal properties acquired by the MLT with Conservancy support have become part of the CCT in Mendocino County. This experience in land acquisition and management has provided MLT with intimate knowledge of CCT routing and implementation challenges.

It is envisioned that this will be the first phase of planning for the CCT in Mendocino County's 130 miles of coastline. As part of this project, MLT will provide priority recommendations for future phases of trail development (including an implementation plan for the Navarro and Glass Beach areas), which will be the basis for the next phase of work.

Site Description: The project site will consist of the entire coastal zone of Mendocino County, which contains marine terraces, forested lands, rocky shoreline and beaches, and agricultural land.

Project History: With funding from the Conservancy, MLT completed the *Mendocino County Coastal Conservation Plan* in 2003 to prioritize coastal land conservation opportunities, including CCT opportunities. This plan will serve as a starting point for the development of the County's coastal trail plan, and for new trail segments.

The Conservancy has an ongoing relationship with MLT regarding coastal access in Mendocino County. In 1996, MLT was the first non-profit organization in the state to open an offer-to-dedicate easement, providing a coastal access trail to the public at Mendocino Bay Viewpoint. Since then, the Conservancy has worked with MLT to open a coastal access trail at Cantus Cove in 1999, and the Belinda Point Trail in 2004. And in 2005, MLT accepted 15 additional offers-to-dedicate and has established a Coastal Access Program that plans for, opens and manages dedicated easements. The Conservancy is currently helping to fund the planning and development of these OTDs.

MLT and its partners have also developed public access on all of the land acquisitions they have completed using Conservancy funds. These properties include the Caspar Headlands, purchased in 2000 and transferred to DPR in 2002; Caspar Beach and uplands, purchased in 1999 and

currently managed by MLT; the Navarro Headlands, purchased in 1999 with access improvements completed last year; the 7,334 acre Big River Estuary, purchased in 2002 and transferred to DPR that same year; and Glass Beach, purchased in 2002 by DPR, with preacquisition assistance from MLT.

In addition, the Conservancy purchased a small parcel near the Navarro Headlands in 1985 in the hope of consolidating it with other nearby properties pursuant to a proposed coastal restoration plan for the area. The Conservancy was unable to acquire other properties, and conditions have changed in the restoration area, both as the result of the development or proposed development of privately owned lots, and by the acquisition of nearby Navarro Headlands by MLT. MLT and the Conservancy now have the opportunity to plan for the use of this parcel and to develop it as a component of the CCT.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$200,000
National Park Service	\$22,400
Coastwalk	\$4,500
Department of Parks and Recreation (in-kind)	\$5,000
Mendocino Land Trust (in-kind)	\$5,000
American Society of Landscape Architects (in-kind)	<u>\$25,000</u>
Total Project Cost	\$261,900

The anticipated source of Conservancy funds is the Safe Neighborhood Parks, Clean Water, Clean Air and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2000 (Proposition 12), which are available to finance the acquisition, development, improvement, rehabilitation, restoration and protection of park, recreational and coastal resources. Proposition 12 specifically calls for the expenditure of funds allocated to the Conservancy for projects north of the Gualala River and for completion of the California coastal trail, consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed plan will identify suitable and desirable CCT sites located in Mendocino County's coastal zone. The project is therefore consistent with Section 31400, which 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, and with Section 31400.3, which authorizes the Conservancy to "provide such assistance as is required to aid . . . nonprofit organizations in establishing a system of public coastal accessways, and related functions necessary to meet the objectives of this division." The Conservancy is further directed by Section 31408(a) to coordinate development of the California Coastal Trail in consultation with DPR, a project partner in this proposal. PRC Section 31408(b) directs DPR to cooperate with the Conservancy in this effort and to make lands under its control available for construction of the trail. MLT will work with DPR to address CCT issues on public land throughout the county.

The proposed project would also be consistent with section 31200, which authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to nonprofit organizations for the restoration of areas of the coastal zone that, because of scattered ownerships, poor lot layout, inadequate park and open space, or other conditions, are adversely affecting the coastal environment or are impeding orderly development. Grants under this section may be utilized for the assembly of parcels of land within designated coastal restoration areas, for the redesign of those areas, and the installation of public improvements required to serve those areas. In its action of June 20, 1985, authorizing the acquisition of the one-acre lot near Navarro Head, the Conservancy found that the then-proposed Navarro Headlands Restoration Project was consistent with the intent of the legislature regarding coastal restoration projects, as expressed in sections 31200 *et seq.* of the Public Resources Code, and involved a significant public resource site whose reservation was necessary to meet Coastal Act policies and objectives. At that time, staff hoped to complete acquisition and visual analysis of up to three lots and was encouraging Mendocino County to apply for a restoration plan grant to help implement the visual quality preservation policies of its draft Land Use Plan for the entire Navarro Headlands area. Although only one lot was acquired, the Conservancy and MLT now have an opportunity to incorporate coastal restoration plan elements into an overall coastal trail plan for the county, and specifically for the Navarro Headlands area.

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

The Strategic Plan identifies developing the Coastal Trail as the Conservancy's "core access strategy". Consistent with **Goal 1 Objective A**, the proposed project will work with DPR to define, map and suggest improvements of the coastal trail on DPR lands.

Consistent with **Goal 1 Objective C**, the proposed project will prioritize trail routes within public and nonprofit ownership.

Consistent with **Goal 1 Objective D**, the proposed project will prioritize trail routes not within public or nonprofit ownership and identify a strategy to acquire new trail segments.

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 is supported by state and local elected officials, the National Park Service, the City of Fort Bragg, and Coastwalk. Letters of support are included in Exhibit 3.

4. **Location:** The proposed project will plan for the CCT within the coastal zone of Mendocino County.
5. **Need:** The Conservancy has identified implementation of the California Coastal Trail as a priority. County-wide planning, such as is proposed here, is needed to achieve a contiguous CCT along California's vast coastline.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The California Coastal Trail, and particularly those components of the trail located within units of the State Parks system, will be designed to serve visitors from throughout the state. Further, the Mendocino coast is a statewide and national scenic and recreational destination.

Additional Criteria

7. **Resolution of more than one issue:** MLT will be identifying improvements needed to existing CCT segments on public lands as well as identifying and prioritizing new CCT trail segments. The plan will also examine the potential use and disposition of coastal restoration property held by the Conservancy since 1985, as an element of the CCT.
8. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
9. **Readiness:** The MLT stands ready to commence development of the plan as soon as funds are secured.
10. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** Development of a continuous shoreline access trail system has been a principal goal of the Conservancy since the inception of the agency.
11. **Return to Conservancy:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
12. **Cooperation:** Planning and prioritizing segments of the CCT will require cooperation from the public and private property owners, state and federal agencies, community groups, and the MLT.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The Mendocino County Land Use Plan, Coastal Element, Chapter 3 assures the public's right of access to the shoreline, and identifies issues and policies regarding public coastal access and trails. Policy 3.6-1 states, "the Coastal Conservancy, State Parks & Recreation, and other appropriate agencies shall be requested to initiate...a public relations program for the protection and enhancement of coastal resources, particularly coastal access...". Policy 3.6-24 further states "the coastal access program shall be implemented in a manner that ensures coordination among and the most efficient use of limited fiscal resources by federal, state, county agencies, and private organizations responsible for acquisition, development, and maintenance of public coastal accessways." The CCT Plan will be developed in coordination with local, state and federal agencies, community groups, non-profit organizations, affected landowners and local citizens. Given a limited funding environment, MLT will look to involve an enthusiastic volunteer community eager to see better public access throughout the county. MLT is uniquely suited to this role, having worked with public agencies, community groups and volunteers for 30 years.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The proposed project is statutorily and categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15262, in that it involves only feasibility or planning studies for possible future actions which the Conservancy has not approved, adopted or funded; and 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15306, in that it involves basic data collection, research, and resource evaluation activities that will not result in any disturbance to an environmental resource, and which will be undertaken as part of a study leading to an action which the Conservancy has not yet approved, adopted, or funded. Staff will file a “Notice of Exemption” upon approval of the project.