

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
November 9, 2006

**WESTERN SALT WORKS SITE ASSESSMENT AND SOUTH SAN DIEGO BAY
TRAIL LINKAGES**

File No. 06-081
Project Manager: Prentiss Williams

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse an amount not to exceed \$125,000 to the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) to conduct a study of the area of south San Diego Bay near the mouth of the Otay River to determine optimal alignments of public trails and the feasibility of the possible future use of the Western Salt Works building for interpretive facilities.

LOCATION: South San Diego Bay, City of San Diego, San Diego County (Exhibit 1)

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Public Access

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: Project Location and Site Map
 - Exhibit 2: Photo and Map of the Western Salt Works Property
 - Exhibit 3: Map of the Bayshore Bikeway
 - Exhibit 4: Map of the Otay Valley Regional Park
 - Exhibit 5: Map of San Diego Bay National Wildlife Refuge
 - Exhibit 6: Letters of Support
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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 the disbursement of an amount not to exceed one hundred twenty-five thousand dollars (\$125,000) to the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) to conduct an access study of the area of south San Diego Bay near the mouth of the Otay River to determine optimal alignments of public trails and the feasibility of possible future use of the Western Salt Building for interpretive facilities, subject to the following conditions:

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1. Prior to the disbursement of any Conservancy funds SANDAG shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy a work plan, budget and schedule, and the names and qualifications of any contractors to be employed to carry out these tasks.
2. SANDAG shall incorporate the relevant guidelines of the Conservancy's 'Standards and Recommendations for Accessway Location and Development' into the design criteria for 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 project is consistent with the public access purposes and criteria in Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, Sections 31400 et seq.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Guidelines and Criteria adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001."

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff is requesting authorization to disburse an amount not to exceed one hundred twenty-five thousand dollars (\$125,000) to the San Diego Association of Governments (SANDAG) to conduct an access study of the area of south San Diego Bay near the mouth of the Otay River to assess public access needs, identify potential constraints to public access, determine optimal alignments of public trails, and evaluate the feasibility of possible future use of the Western Salt Building for interpretive facilities. The planning area includes the 17-acre Western Salt Works property, the mouth of the Otay River and associated flood plain, the San Diego Bay National Wildlife Refuge, 1068 acres of salt production ponds, and a portion of the San Diego Bayshore Bikeway route.

The planning area is the locus of four public initiatives, all in different stages of planning or implementation, relating to environmental protection and public access: the San Diego Bayshore Bikeway, the San Diego Bay National Wildlife Refuge, the Otay Valley Regional Park and the Pacific Southwest Railway Museum. In addition to its intrinsic historic and environmental values, the site presents an opportunity to bring together these four interrelated projects to create a public access point where visitors can surround themselves with and gain entrance to the unique history, environment, and recreational opportunities of the communities of South San Diego Bay.

The Western Salt Works site has the potential to tie together an access point to the Bayshore Bikeway, a staging area and trailhead for the Otay Valley Regional Park (OVRP), an interpretive center for the San Diego Bay National Wildlife Refuge (SDNWR), and a destination along an excursion train from historic Santa Fe Depot and Museum in National City.

The Western Salt Works property and the entire south bay area are undergoing a transition in land use from predominantly industrial uses to largely resource conservation and visitor-serving

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purposes. Careful analysis and planning are needed to assure that future uses maximize the site's potential to serve as a regional resource.

Western Salt Works Property and Building

The Western Salt Works plant (Exhibit 2) is located on a 17-acre parcel owned by the San Diego Regional Airport Authority (the Airport Authority). The Airport Authority leases the property to South Bay Salt Works Company (SBSW), which operates an evaporative salt production and processing facility. The property is adjacent to the SDNWR and the old Coronado Beltline Railroad. The United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) is developing a Comprehensive Conservation Plan (CCP) for the SDNWR, that includes the restoration of the salt production ponds currently leased to South Bay Salt Works as one possible management scenario. The South Bay Salt Works' current lease expires at the end of 2007, at which time USFWS could acquire the property.

Evaporative salt production has been a commercial enterprise in south San Diego Bay since 1871, and was likely practiced by Native Americans in the area for centuries before that. The original Western Salt Works building was constructed in 1916 and significantly expanded in 1949. At its height of production, Western Salt Works operated 32 salt ponds and nine buildings for salt production. Commercial salt production in San Diego Bay has been greatly scaled back in recent years, largely due to economic and market forces. Once South Bay Salt Works ceases its commercial salt production, the USFWS plans to acquire the ponds and incorporate them into the SDNWR. The Western Salt Works Building and property could also be transferred to the USFWS or another public owner at this time as well. The Airport Authority would be a willing seller.

One of the primary purposes of the proposed project would be to investigate the feasibility of converting the Western Salt Works Building into an interpretive center for the SDNWR. The Western Salt Works building is ideally situated for an interpretive center to showcase the natural and cultural history of the south San Diego Bay region. The property's proximity to the Bayshore Bikeway, the Otay Valley Regional Park and the old Coronado Beltline Railroad highlight the site's potential for other visitor-serving facilities as well.

Bayshore Bikeway

The Bayshore bikeway is a 24-mile bicycle path that encircles San Diego Bay, crossing through the Cities of San Diego, National City, Chula Vista, Imperial Beach and Coronado (Exhibit 3). The Bikeway currently exists as a combination of off-street, Class 1 bike paths and on-street, Class 2 & 3 bike lanes and routes. Planning and construction of the Bikeway is coordinated through SANDAG. The ultimate goal is for the Bayshore Bikeway to consist entirely of one continuous off-street, Class 1 bike path. The current alignment of the Bayshore Bikeway in the area between the Western Salt Works property and the City of Imperial Beach is an on-street bike route that traverses several busy city streets. One of the purposes of the proposed project would be to identify potential alignments for an off-street, dedicated bike lane for the Bikeway in this area.

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Otay Valley Regional Park

The Otay Valley Regional Park (OVRP) is still a work in progress. The overall vision for the completed park is outlined in the OVRP Concept Plan, the area of which stretches 13 miles from Otay Lakes County Park in eastern San Diego County to the San Diego Bay (Exhibit 4). The planning area incorporates over 8,500 acres of land in the cities of Chula Vista, San Diego and parts of unincorporated San Diego County. The park was established through a Joint Exercise of Powers Agreement (JEPA) between these three jurisdictions and is governed by a 3-member Policy Committee which is advised by a 30-member Citizens Advisory Committee. The primary uses envisioned for the OVRP by the Concept Plan are open space, trails, nature interpretation and education, and passive recreation. A Trails Plan and Trail Guidelines for the OVRP have been developed by the County and adopted by all three jurisdictions. Identification of possible trail alignments and locations for a trail staging area for the OVRP near the San Diego Bay shoreline is one of the goals of the proposed project.

San Diego Bay National Wildlife Refuge

Managed by the United States Fish and Wildlife Service (USFWS) as part of its National Wildlife Refuge System, the San Diego Bay National Wildlife Refuge (SDNWR) is made up of the Sweetwater Marsh and the South San Diego Bay Units (Exhibit 4). The SDNWR was established to protect threatened and endangered plant and animal species of San Diego Bay and encompasses 2,620 acres of land and water in and around San Diego Bay. Most of what remains of the historic salt marsh, mudflats, and other wetlands of San Diego Bay is preserved within the SDNWR. Like the OVRP, the SDNWR is a work in progress. Although most of the land that will eventually make up the completed refuge has been acquired by the USFWS, the CCP (the plan for habitat restoration and management of the refuge) is still being developed and will take many years to implement. The salt production ponds currently operated by Western Salt Works will eventually become part of the SDNWR and preliminary plans for the refuge include opportunities for public access consistent with the protection of sensitive habitat. The feasibility of converting the Western Salt Works Building into an interpretive center for the refuge is one of the primary purposes of the proposed project.

Coronado Beltline Excursion Train

The Pacific Southwest Railway Museum Association is a non-profit educational organization dedicated to the preservation and interpretation of railroads as they existed in the Pacific Southwest. The Museum Association has proposed the operation of an excursion train that would run along the still-extant tracks of the historic Coronado Beltline Railroad from the Santa Fe Depot in National City to Main Street in Chula Vista. (The National City Depot is operated as a museum by the San Diego Electric Railway Association.)

The Museum Association envisions a primarily recreational train that would serve the several public facilities located along the old Coronado Beltline, including the Railroad Museum, the Chula Vista Harbor, the Chula Vista Nature Center and the SDNWR. The proposed project would examine the feasibility of establishing such an excursion line in this area. The Western Salt Works property is situated along the old Coronado Beltline Railroad. The San Diego Metropolitan Transit System (MTS) owns the right-of-way.

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San Diego Area Association of Governments (SANDAG)

The proposed grantee, SANDAG, serves as the forum for regional decision-making for San Diego County's eighteen cities and the County government. SANDAG builds consensus, makes strategic plans, obtains and allocates resources, plans, engineers, and builds public transportation, conducts research, and provides information on a broad range of topics pertinent to the region's quality of life.

As the regional planning agency for transportation, SANDAG allocates millions of dollars each year in local, state, and federal funds for the region's transportation network. SANDAG develops the Regional Transportation Plan to implement a long-range vision for buses, the Trolley, rail, highways, major streets, bicycle travel, walking, goods movement, and airport services. SANDAG also coordinates regional planning efforts in the areas of land-use and regional growth, housing, economics and finance, the environment, border security, and public safety. SANDAG has had the primary role in the planning and implementation of the Bayshore Bikeway, as well as other regional bike and pedestrian trails, such as the San Diego Coastal Rail Trail. SANDAG maintains a large professional staff composed of more than 100 planners, engineers, and research specialists, which is well suited to carry out the proposed project.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$125,000
Total Project Cost	\$125,000

The intended sources of funds for the Conservancy grant are the Conservancy's FY 04/05 appropriation from the California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks and Coastal Protection Act of 2002 (Proposition 40), and the Conservancy's FY 05/06 appropriation from the Water Security, Clean Drinking Water, Coastal Beach Protection Fund of 2002 (Proposition 50).

Consistent with the purposes of Proposition 40, the proposed project would be carried out in accordance with the provisions of Division 21 (see "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section below).

Proposition 50 requires that a portion of its funds be used for the development of facilities to promote public access and participation in the conservation of land, water and wildlife. Eligible projects under Proposition 50 include nature centers that are in or adjacent to watersheds and wetlands and provide wildlife viewing, outdoor experiences, and conservation education programs (California Water Code Section 79571). Consistent with this proposed funding source, the proposed project will analyze the feasibility of converting the Western Salt Works Building into a natural history interpretive center for the SDNWR.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 9 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31400-31405), regarding public access and enjoyment of coastal resources. 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

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coastline. Through the proposed action, the Conservancy will play a primary role in developing a public access plan for an important part of the South San Diego bayfront.

Section 31400.1 allows the Conservancy to award grants to a public agency for accessways to and along the coast that serve more than local public needs. The project site, which includes the cities of San Diego and Chula Vista, is located in one of the most heavily visited coastal areas in California. More than 14.2 million visitors from throughout the state and the country come to San Diego annually to enjoy its beaches and recreational amenities. The Bayshore Bikeway is an important regional trail system that is well-used by pedestrians as well as bicyclists. Careful planning is needed to complete this portion of the Bayshore Bikeway, as well as to develop other trail systems and access opportunities in location.

Section 31400.3 states that the Conservancy may assist public and nonprofit organizations in developing and implementing a system of public accessways to and along the state's coastline. Development of a public access plan is the first step towards developing and improving public access to this portion of the San Diego Bay shoreline.

Section 31408 charges the Conservancy with coordinating the development of the California Coastal Trail (CCT), along with the Department of Parks and Recreation and the California Coastal Commission. When completed, the Bayshore Bikeway will be one of the components of the CCT in this part of San Diego. The proposed project will help identify possible alignments for the Bayshore Bikeway as well as possible staging areas for trails in the OVRP, which could connect inland areas to the CCT.

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
STANDARDS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR
ACCESSWAY LOCATION AND DEVELOPMENT:**

The project is a design and planning program, so the "Standards and Recommendations" are not directly applicable. However, SANDAG will be asked to incorporate these guidelines into the planning process so that the accessway projects ultimately implemented will be consistent with these recommendations.

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

Consistent with **Goal 1 Objective E** of the Conservancy's Strategic Plan, the proposed project will help improve a segment of a regional trail system by identifying routes for portions of the Bayshore Bikeway and the Otay River Regional Park trail system.

Consistent with **Goal 2 Objective D** of the Conservancy's Strategic Plan, the proposed project will help to correct potentially dangerous conditions and will support the possible development of a new environmental education center at the Western Salt Works site.

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Consistent with **Goal 3 Objective A** of the Conservancy's Strategic Plan, the proposed project will promote the restoration or protection of a historic resource: the Western Salt Works processing building and the Coronado Beltline right-of-way.

**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:** See Exhibit 3.
4. **Location:** The proposed project would be located within the coastal zone of the City and County of San Diego and the City of Chula Vista.
5. **Need:** Due to the multiple ownerships and jurisdictions that comprise the study area, there is no other single agency with the authority to fund an access study for the entire site. The Conservancy is in a unique position to be able to provide funding for this kind of study
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The proposed project site is located in one of the most heavily visited coastal areas in California. More than 14.2 million visitors from throughout the state and the country come to San Diego annually to enjoy its beaches and recreational amenities. The Bayshore Bikeway and the Otay River Regional Park trails are both important regional trail systems that serve users from all of San Diego County and well as from throughout the state.

Additional Criteria

8. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The proposed study will help resolve a number of outstanding issues in this area, including the identification of appropriate routes for public access, the possible future reuse of the Western Salt Works building as an interpretive center, and the feasibility of reviving an excursion train along the Coronado Beltline Railroad.
12. **Readiness:** The proposed grantee, SANDAG, is the regional transportation planning agency for all of San Diego County and coordinates planning in a number of other areas, including land use and regional growth, housing and environment. SANDAG staff is ready to commence the proposed project upon authorization by the Coastal Conservancy and to carry out the project in a timely manner.
13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** The Coastal Conservancy's commitment to restoring the natural resources and improving public access opportunities in the south San Diego Bay area goes back more than twenty years. The Conservancy has been involved in planning efforts for wetlands restoration in south San Diego Bay since 1984, when it

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participated in a habitat restoration project along the Chula Vista waterfront near the Sweetwater Marsh. The Coastal Conservancy has also been working with the County of San Diego to plan for and execute the land acquisition program for the OVRP. The Conservancy helped fund the acquisition of over 705 acres of land for the regional park over a period of about fourteen years. The proposed study will help tie together the goals of habitat protection and public access.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The proposed project site falls within the jurisdiction of both the City of San Diego and the City of Chula Vista and is consistent with the Local Coastal Programs (LCPs) of both cities.

The Otay Valley Regional Park and the south San Diego Bay salt ponds, including the Western Salt Works property, are included in the Otay Mesa-Nestor Community Plan, which was certified by the California Coastal Commission on August 13, 1997 as City of San Diego LCP Amendment No. 1-97B. The proposed project would be consistent with the following LCP policies for the OVRP:

- Provide active and passive regional recreational activities
- Provide opportunities for educating the public about the natural and cultural resources of the Otay Valley
- Provide a continuous east-west trail system for hiking, bicycling, and equestrian use along the Otay Valley, incorporating existing trails and utility easement roads where appropriate.

The proposed project would also be consistent with the following LCP policies for the Salt Ponds area:

- Coordinate the Refuge, OVRP, MSCP and private development planning efforts to ensure that the natural resource and wildlife habitat areas of the Salt Ponds are preserved
- Plan and implement a section of the Bayshore Bikeway route in the vicinity of the Salt Ponds
- Provide for a bicycle trail linkage connecting the Bayshore Bikeway route to the future OVRP bicycle trail system
- Preserve the Western Salt Company's salt processing building
- Create an interpretive center in this general vicinity to educate the public about the unique natural resources of south San Diego Bay and the history of evaporative salt production industry.

The proposed project would also be consistent with the City of Chula Vista LCP Land Use Plan certified by the Coastal Commission on January 15, 1993, which includes public access to the shoreline consistent with habitat preservation as one of its key provisions.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The project is statutorily exempt from the provisions of the California Environmental Quality Act pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15262 because the project involves only feasibility and planning studies for possible future actions which have yet to be approved or adopted. As required by this section, these documents will involve the consideration of environmental factors. This project does not include the funding of any construction activities. Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon approval of the action.