

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

August 2, 2012

**ALISO AND WOOD CANYONS WILDERNESS PARK:
SIGNAGE PROGRAM**

Project No. 12-020

Project Manager: Deborah Ruddock

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$160,000 to the Laguna Canyon Foundation to develop and implement a signage program for the Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park in partnership with the County of Orange for the purpose of supporting, managing, and enhancing public access.

LOCATION: Unincorporated area of Orange County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Public Access

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location and Site Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [Area photos](#)

Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31400-31409 of the Public Resources Code, regarding public access to the coast:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of one-hundred sixty thousand dollars (\$160,000) to the Laguna Canyon Foundation (“Foundation”) to develop and implement a signage program for the purpose of supporting, managing and enhancing public access to the Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park in partnership with the County of Orange (“County”), subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of any Conservancy funds for the project, the Foundation shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (“Executive Officer”):
 - a) A final work plan, including the names of any subcontractors to be used in the completion of the project, and a project schedule and budget.
 - b) A written agreement with the County for the installation and maintenance of signs.

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2. The Foundation shall incorporate into the signs an acknowledgement of Conservancy and Proposition 12 funding, subject to approval by the Executive Officer.”

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 current Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
2. The proposed authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31400-31409) with respect to public access. The proposed project will develop and implement a signage program for the trail system in the Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park, thereby supporting and enhancing public access to and within this area and to the larger connecting regional trail network that provides public access to and along the coast in southern Orange County.
3. The Laguna Canyon Foundation is a nonprofit organization, existing under the provisions of Section 501 (c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code, whose purposes, which include the preservation, restoration or enhancement of land for habitat protection, public access and recreation, are consistent with Division 21 of the California Public Resources Code”.
4. The proposed project serves a greater-than-local need.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

The proposed authorization of \$160,000 will permit the Laguna Canyon Foundation (Foundation), working in partnership with the County of Orange, to develop and implement a signage program for the Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park (Park). The 3,873-acre County-owned and managed Park is located in an unincorporated area situated mostly within the coastal zone (Exhibit 1).

The Park is part of the South Coast Wilderness, comprising several unique parks and preserves including Crystal Cove State Park and the Laguna Coast Wilderness Park (Exhibit 2). The 22,000-acre South Coast Wilderness’ extensive trail network stretches along the coast from Newport Beach to Dana Point and to the coast from inland communities. The Park is also part of the Aliso Creek Corridor, a 19-mile greenbelt linking the Cleveland National Forest to the Pacific Ocean. The Corridor features scenic highways, arterial bikeways, riding and hiking trails, various local and community parks, and three County regional parks in addition to the Aliso and Wood Canyons Park: Whiting Ranch Regional Park, Laguna Niguel Regional Park, and Aliso Beach Park.

Southern Orange County’s regional network of parks and open spaces is a rare urban oasis for the area’s more than 600,000 residents and large year-round tourist population. The Aliso and Wood Canyons Park alone serves an estimated 120,000 visitors annually. Because of the public

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demands on the Park and the sensitivity of its natural resources, the Park's Resource Management Plan calls for a signage program to support, enhance, and manage access, as well as to encourage and facilitate access to the larger regional open space network. As the Foundation and County have limited financial resources at their disposal for this purpose, they request Conservancy assistance for the signage component of a program that will include public outreach and design, fabrication and installation of gateway/trailhead, directional, interpretive and regulatory signage. Themes and interpretive information will reinforce the importance of natural resources stewardship and will be informed by the Resource Management Plan, the Natural Communities Conservation Plan/Habitat Conservation Plan (NCCP/HCP) for the Nature Reserve of Orange County sub-region, and the Orange County Bikeway Plan. While the signs will tell the Aliso and Wood Canyons Park's unique story, they will incorporate design standards developed and implemented at the adjacent Laguna Coast Wilderness Park and Crystal Cove State Park.

The proposed project will be undertaken pursuant to an existing agreement between the Foundation and the County covering mutual roles and responsibilities in park improvement projects. The Foundation will manage the project and associated contracts. County staff will provide environmental services and install and maintain the signs. Most recently the Foundation and the County collaborated on an interpretive exhibit program for the Nix Nature Center in the Laguna Coast Wilderness Park completed in 2011 using a grant of \$295,000 of Proposition 12 funds appropriated to the Conservancy for projects in the South Coast Wilderness. The proposed authorization requires a separate agreement specific to the signage project committing the County to install and maintain the signs.

Supporters of the project include Laguna Greenbelt, Inc. and the County (Exhibit 3).

Site Description:

The 3,873-acre Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park is located adjacent to the Laguna Coast Wilderness Park in the San Joaquin/Sheep Hills area in unincorporated south Orange County. The Park features include numerous trails; rugged canyons and rock outcrops; diverse habitats (coastal sage scrub, native grassland, streams, vernal pools and seeps) supporting several endangered and threatened species (California Gnatcatcher, Least Bell's Vireo, Southwestern Willow Flycatcher, and Southwestern Arroyo Toad); and 43 archeological and 8 historic sites, which are preserved pursuant to Section 110 of the National Preservation Act of 1966.

Project History:

The Safe Neighborhood Parks, Clean Water, Clean Air, and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2000 ("Proposition 12") allocates \$12,500,000 to the Coastal Conservancy to "acquire land needed to connect important coastal watershed and scenic areas in the Laguna Coast Wilderness Park". (Public Resources Code § 5096.352(g).) A 2004 re-appropriation permitted the Conservancy to use these funds, subject to Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, "to undertake projects for the South Coast Wilderness System of coastal canyons and watersheds in South Orange County, including, but not limited to, properties in Laguna Coast Wilderness Park and Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park".

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Since the passage of Proposition 12, the non-profit Laguna Canyon Foundation (Foundation), the City of Laguna Beach (City), and the County of Orange (County) have been working together and with the Conservancy, the public, and other major conservation organizations to identify, prioritize and complete these projects. To date, the Conservancy has awarded grants totaling approximately \$10.6 million to the City of Laguna Beach and to the Foundation for Proposition 12 purposes. The City has been the recipient of approximately \$10 million to purchase 255 acres of land for the expansion of the Laguna Coast Wilderness Park. The Conservancy previously authorized three grants to the Foundation totaling approximately \$330,000 to document and negotiate these acquisitions and a grant of \$295,440 to create an interpretive program for the James and Rosemary Nix Nature Center located in the Laguna Coast Wilderness Park.

The proposed project would be the first grant of these Conservancy Proposition 12 funds for the Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	160,000
Total Project Costs	160,000

The expected source of Conservancy funds for the proposed project is a FY 2010/2011 re-appropriation to the Conservancy of funds appropriated in accordance with the Safe Neighborhood Parks, Clean Water, Clean Air and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2000 (Proposition 12, Public Resources Code § 5096.300 et. seq.). Pursuant to Public Resources Code § 5096.352, these funds are generally available for acquisition, preservation, restoration and enhancement of real property and the development of public use facilities in coastal areas and watersheds. Public Resources Code § 5096.352(g) specifically authorizes funds for acquisition of land needed to connect important coastal watershed and scenic areas in the Laguna Coast Wilderness Park. Pursuant to Public Resources Code § 5096.3075, in the FY 2004/2005 Budget Act, the legislature reallocated the remaining section 5096.352(g) funds for “projects for the South Coast Wilderness System of coastal canyons and watersheds in south Orange County, including, but not limited to, properties in Laguna Coast Wilderness Park and the Aliso and Wood [*sic*] Canyons Wilderness Park.” The proposed project is a signage program for the Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park that will enhance public use of this park, and thus the proposed project is an appropriate use of Proposition 12 funds.

The County of Orange will contribute in-kind services with a value estimated at \$22,000.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

This project is consistent with the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, specifically with Chapter 9 pertaining to public coastal access.

Under §31400.3, the Conservancy may provide such assistance as is required to aid public agencies and nonprofit organizations in establishing a system of public coastal access ways, and related functions necessary to meet the objectives of Division 21. Consistent with this section, the Foundation will use authorized funds to create and implement a signage program to support and enhance access to and within a coastal wilderness park system.

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

Consistent with Public Access **Goal 2, Objective 2B** of the Conservancy's 2007 Strategic Plan, the Foundation and County will develop and implement a project to support and enhance Aliso and Wood Canyons Park, which is located in a coastal watershed and is part of a coastal wilderness park system.

Consistent with Public Access **Goal 3, Objective 3C**, the proposed project involves the planning, design and implementation of interpretive signage relating to coastal and coastal watershed resources stewardship.

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

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, last updated on November 10, 2011, 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:** Letters of support are included in Exhibit 3.
4. **Location:** The proposed project will enhance public access in a park located mostly in the coastal zone and that features trails providing access to and along the south Orange County coast.
5. **Need:** Absent the proposed authorization, the County will not be able to undertake the project because of shrinking capital budgets. The Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park would remain the only wilderness park in the South Coast Wilderness without interpretive and adequate directional and regulatory signage.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** As discussed in various sections above, the proposed signage project will support and enhance access to a coastal wilderness park system serving multiple communities from south of Newport Beach to Dana Point as well as a large year-round tourist population.

7. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The project site's vulnerability to sea level rise is low given its distance from the shoreline and elevation.

Additional Criteria

- 9 **Resolution of more than one issue:** The signage program will address multiple issues including access, resource stewardship, and safety.
13. **Readiness:** The Foundation can begin the project immediately.
14. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See "Project History" above
16. **Cooperation:** The Foundation and County will cooperate to develop and implement the project and will involve the public at the earliest stages.
18. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** The signage program for Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park will minimize greenhouse gas emissions to the extent feasible.
1. This is a small, local-based project, with meetings involving local stakeholders.
 2. Trail maps encouraging access via the most appropriate park entrances will be provided, eliminating or reducing the need for motorized vehicle trips, particularly from adjacent neighborhoods. Signs at major and minor trailheads will include a Park Trail Map and distance information.
 3. Signage fabrication will be performed by contractors consistent with federal and state emission requirements and will follow best management practices. Fabricators will be local vendors. Product delivery will be scheduled to reduce vehicle trips.
 4. Sign materials will include ArmorGrafix's new Armor Cor Recycled Content Composite Panels. This environmentally friendly product is non-toxic and manufactured from a wide array of 100% recycled content including newspaper, corrugated cardboard, agricultural and other waste fibers. Another sign material will be iZone panels made in a digital high pressure laminate process that doesn't emit greenhouse gasses. The majority of the paper content will be sourced from suppliers who are third-party certified to the Sustainable Forestry Initiative Standard. The SFI is endorsed by the Programme for the Endorsement of Forest Certification.
 5. The majority of the signs will be installed with hand tools by County staff observing best management practices.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

Most of the Park lies within the Coastal Zone in a coastal watershed, and is covered by three certified Local Coastal Programs (LCPs) for the County of Orange, the City of Laguna Beach, and the City of Laguna Niguel. The County and City of Laguna Niguel documents are identical and do not specifically address signage. However, the Coastal Access section emphasizes the importance of public access and trails. The signage project would be consistent with the LCP's objective of providing appropriate coastal access and trails for the public.

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The City of Laguna Beach's General Plan constitutes the City's LCP. The General Plan's Policies were updated on May 5, 2010 and include several that support consistency of the signage project with the LCP, including trail signage [Policy No. 6O: "Provide signage that displays a system of easily recognizable markers identifying the type, length and location of trails."] and sources of funding [Policy No. 5C: "Pursue federal, state and county funding for parks."].

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

Design and installation of public access signage in the Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park is exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to 14 Cal. Code Reg. § 15311, which exempts placement of minor structures accessory to existing facilities, including on-premise signs and 14 Cal. Code of Regulations § 15303, which exempts new construction of small structures including accessory structures. For this project, gateway, directional, interpretive and regulatory signage will be placed at existing accessways within the park, including trailheads, trails, and scenic overlooks, as well as co-located at existing publicly accessible historic sites. The signs will be small, minor structures that are accessory to the Park. Upon Conservancy approval of the proposed project, staff will file a Notice of Exemption.