

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
February 14, 2013

**GUADALUPE-NIPOMO DUNES CENTER INTERPRETIVE EXHIBIT PLANNING**

Project No. 12-057-01  
Project Manager: Rachel Couch

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$15,000 to the Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes Center to prepare plans and designs to update interpretive exhibits to facilitate coastal access.

**LOCATION:** Guadalupe, California

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** System of Public Accessways

---

**EXHIBITS**

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

Exhibit 2: [Photos and Figures](#)

Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)

---

**RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:**

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31111 and 31400 *et seq* of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed fifteen thousand dollars (\$15,000) to the Guadalupe Nipomo Dunes Center (“The Dunes Center”) to prepare plans and designs to update existing interpretive educational exhibits to facilitate coastal access. Prior to the disbursement of funds, the Conservancy’s Executive Officer shall review and approve in writing a work program, budget and schedule for the project and any contractors proposed to be engaged 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 current Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
2. The proposed authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Public Resources Code Section 31111, regarding planning grants; and Sections 31400 *et seq*, regarding public access.

3. The Dunes Center is a nonprofit organization that qualifies under section 501(c)(3) of the United States Internal Revenue Service Code, and whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.”
- 

### **PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff is recommending that the Conservancy provide a grant of up to \$15,000 (fifteen thousand dollars) to the Guadalupe Nipomo Dunes Center (“The Dunes Center”) to plan, design and update its interpretive exhibits for the Guadalupe Nipomo Dunes Complex. The Dunes Center proposes to refurbish exhibits located in its education center to encourage a holistic and interdisciplinary understanding of the region’s natural history.

The exhibit project, entitled *Tracing the Circle from Subsistence to Stewardship*, would be designed to inspire an appreciation of how the region’s environmental, cultural, and political histories intertwine to form a distinctive bioregion. The Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes is the largest dunes complex on the West Coast of the United States, and lies within the lower Santa Maria watershed. The Dunes Complex has significant biodiversity and is the largest coastal dune ecosystem on the West Coast with over 1,400 different species of flora and fauna, including rare endemic plant species. The Dunes Center hopes to encourage a compelling connection to place, an understanding of issues facing the environment, and a sense of urgency for community stewardship. Creating new and updating exhibits will also give locals a reason to return to The Dunes Center, thereby increasing its attendance and support.

*Tracing the Circle from Subsistence to Stewardship* would focus on the Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes ecosystem as a lens to demonstrate the changing ways that people have utilized the region’s environment over time. This would start with interpretation on how the Chumash tribe used the dunes. The expansion of European and American settlement took place during the Rancho Era of the early 1800s, and brought with it a wave of invasive species which altered and continue to affect the dunes ecosystem. During Hollywood’s Golden Age in the 1920s, the Dunes served as a backdrop to one of America’s most renowned movies, *The Ten Commandments*, where the region was portrayed as Egypt. This piece of history attracts a large number of tourists to The Dunes Center, which houses some artifacts from the movie set. A bohemian group of nature lovers and artists known as the Dunites called the Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes home throughout the 1920s and 1930s. The discovery of oil in the region in 1948 changed the course of the Dunes’ history forever. Today the region serves as a protected natural reserve created after people became aware of the area’s environmental sensitivity.

The Dunes Center is the only interpretive center for the Dunes Complex. Housed on Main Street (Highway One) in the agricultural city of Guadalupe, The Dunes Center is highly visible to incoming visitors to the Dunes Complex. The Dunes Center also most recently moved to a new location, immediately next door to its former location, to include disabled access to its visitors. Its relocation presents a timely opportunity to update and replace exhibits to better educate the public. The proposed project will fund the research and design of new interpretive exhibits. Specific objectives of the project include: creating attractive, interactive and interdisciplinary exhibits to educate the public on conservation and celebrate the regional maritime and environmental history; updating the current exhibits; providing the general public with an

experience that will instill a sense of environmental stewardship, for California's coast, the Santa Maria River and its watersheds, and the dunes and wetlands of the Dunes Complex; and, preserving and protecting artifacts and specimens obtained from the Dunes Complex.

The Dunes Center is a 501(c)3 organization established in 1999. Its current environmental educational and interpretive programming consists of high quality hands-on learning experiences for elementary school students that allow many underserved children access to equipment and activities not regularly available to them. The Dunes Center staff visit K-8 classrooms and offer in-class learning in addition to after-school programs for disadvantaged children, and field-based learning experiences at the nearby Oso Flaco Lake. In the 2011-2012 academic year, 4,000 school-aged children in Santa Barbara and San Luis Obispo County learned about the Dunes Complex through Center's education programs. Since the organization began offering programs in 2005, over 40,000 students have participated. The Dunes Center is an active participant of the Dunes Collaborative, a voluntary group of public agencies and private organizations that collectively manage 22,000 acres of coastal dune habitat between Pismo Beach and Point Sal State Beach and promote the conservation of and public access to the Dunes Complex.

**Site Description:** The Dunes Center is located in the City of Guadalupe in northern Santa Barbara County. Guadalupe is a small agricultural town located on Highway 1, nine miles west of the city of Santa Maria in the lower Santa Maria River watershed. Guadalupe is a largely agricultural community, where 25% of the population lacks a high school diploma and an estimated 14% live in poverty. The Guadalupe community is underserved in terms of cultural and environmental education resources; thus The Dunes Center is a valuable community resource. The Dunes Center moved to a new building, located at 1065 Guadalupe Street, in the fall of 2012. The new building offers increased ADA-accessible floor space for interpretive exhibits on the ground level, an improvement over the previous location's second story exhibit space.

The Guadalupe Nipomo Dunes Complex was declared a National Natural Landmark in 1974 and includes Point Sal State Beach, Paradise Beach County Park, Rancho Guadalupe Dunes Preserve County Park, Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes National Wildlife Refuge, and the Oceano Dunes State Vehicular Recreation Area.

**Project History:** In 1999, after its establishment, the Conservancy granted funds to The Dunes Center to purchase property for use as a visitor's center for the Dunes Complex. In 2002-03, The Dunes Center received a grant from the Guadalupe Nipomo Dunes Oil Spill Natural Resource and Visitor Serving Trust Fund, comprised of settlement funds from the Guadalupe Nipomo Dunes Oil Spill litigation, to plan, design and implement interpretive exhibits at the visitor's center. The proposed grant will be used to update the decade-old exhibits in their new location. In 2011-12, the Conservancy supported The Dunes Center's reorganization and property trade, resulting in a new location for the visitor's center immediately next door and providing both disabled access to its visitors as well as greater financial security for The Dunes Center. The Conservancy participates in the Dunes Collaborative and has supported acquisition, restoration and public access projects aimed at conserving the resources of the Dunes Complex. Currently, The Dunes Center is expanding its programming to include exhibits that will enhance the organization's research and education goals while encouraging more visitors to the Center and to the Dunes themselves, public outreach, and organizational support.

**PROJECT FINANCING**

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b>	\$15,000.00
<b>Total Project Costs</b>	\$15,000.00

The anticipated source of Conservancy funds is an appropriation from the Conservancy's Coastal Access Account. Coastal Access funds may be used for grants to public agencies and nonprofit organizations for the development, maintenance, and operation of new or existing facilities that provide public access to the coast. Use of these funds is appropriate for this activity because the proposed project will develop and update interpretive exhibits at an existing coastal facility that provides education and interpretation about the Dunes Complex.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:**

This project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 9 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, Sections 31111 and 31400 *et seq.*, regarding planning grants to nonprofit organizations, and enjoyment of coastal resources, respectively.

Consistent with Section 31111, the Conservancy may award grants to The Dunes Center, a nonprofit organization, for planning purposes for the proposed project.

The proposed project is consistent with Sections 31400 *et seq.* Section 31400 states the Legislature's intent that the Conservancy play a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the coast. Section 31400.1 authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to non-profit agencies to develop, operate, or manage lands for public access purposes that serve more than local public needs. Consistent with this section, the Conservancy would award a grant to The Dunes Center to help develop new educational exhibits. The Dunes Center is a visitor serving facility that provides interpretive and educational information about the Guadalupe Nipomo Dunes Complex and serves visitors from throughout and beyond the State. The Dunes Center also provides educational programs about the Dunes Complex to local school children, both in class and in its visitor's center. The educational exhibits will be installed in the visitor's center but the content of the exhibits will also be included in the content of the classroom presentational materials.

Consistent with Section 31400.2, staff recommends approval of this project after evaluating the amount of funding provided by the Conservancy in light of the total amount of available funds for coastal educational/interpretive centers, the fiscal resources of the grantee, the urgency of the project relative to other eligible projects, and the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria & Guidelines. Consistent with Section 31400.3, the Conservancy may 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.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S 2013  
STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):**

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective E** of the Conservancy's 2013 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will upgrade a facility to increase and enhance coastal recreational opportunities for residents and visitors. Specifically, the project will result in the design of several interpretive displays at The Dunes Center emphasizing coastal resource education and facilitating coastal public access.

**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:** The project enjoys strong public support from the Mayor of the City of Guadalupe, Santa Barbara County Supervisor Doreen Farr, Assemblymember Katcho Achadjian, the Guadalupe Cultural Arts and Education Center, the Dunes Collaborative, and the Department of Fish and Wildlife.
4. **Location:** The proposed project physical exhibits are located at The Dunes Center, in the City of Guadalupe. The educational programming at The Dunes Center is focused entirely on the nearby Guadalupe-Nipomo Dunes Coastal Ecosystem.
5. **Need:** Without Conservancy assistance, this unique opportunity to design new exhibits for the newly expanded visitor center will not be implemented in the near future, given the current fundraising challenges facing non-profit organizations due to the economic downturn.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The Guadalupe Nipomo Dunes Complex is a National Natural Landmark. This project will serve the visiting population of the Central Coast; the inland San Joaquin Valley communities (this coastline holds their closest beaches); and visitors from throughout and beyond the State who come to view the largest dune complex on the West Coast of the United States. Annually, the region has more than 2 million visitors.
7. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The Dunes Center is located three miles inland from the Pacific Ocean at 85 feet above sea level. The building is therefore not vulnerable to sea-level rise in the foreseeable future.

**Additional Criteria**

8. **Urgency:** The project support is necessary now to take advantage of The Dunes Center's recent transition to a new ADA-accessible visitor center. The expanded first floor exhibit

space provides a unique and timely opportunity to provide an improved interpretive experience for its visitors.

9. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.

10. **Readiness:** The project can begin as soon as funding is approved.

11. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** “See “Project History” above.”

**COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:** The Dunes Center Interpretive Exhibit Design project does not have the potential for resulting in either a direct physical change in the environment, or a reasonably foreseeable indirect physical change in the environment and, therefore, is not considered a “project” under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) (See 14 Cal. Code of Regulations §15378).