

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

June 20, 2013

**ALISO AND WOOD CANYONS WILDERNESS PARK
PUBLIC ACCESS IMPROVEMENTS**

Project No.13-010-01

Project Manager: Deborah Ruddock

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$675,000 to the County of Orange for public access improvements at the Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park, including (1) construction of new trails, parking and circulation improvements, native landscaping, signage, and visitor amenities; and (2) planning and design of new visitor-serving and administrative buildings.

LOCATION: Laguna Niguel, Orange County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Public Access

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location and Site Maps](#)
- Exhibit 2: [Photos](#)
- Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)
- Exhibit 4: [Mitigated Negative Declaration](#)

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 six hundred seventy-five thousand dollars (\$675,000) to the County of Orange (“County”) for public access improvements at the Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park, including (1) construction of new trails, parking and circulation improvements, native landscaping, signage, and visitor amenities; and (2) planning and design of new visitor-serving and administrative buildings, subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of Conservancy funds for each component of the project, the County shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (“Executive Officer”) a final work plan, including the names of any subcontractors to be used in the completion of the project, a project schedule and budget, and evidence that the County has obtained all necessary permits and approvals.

2. The County shall acknowledge Conservancy and “Proposition 12” funding by erecting and maintaining a sign or signs on the property, the design and location of which has been approved 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 authorization is consistent with Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31400 – 31409), with respect to public access to and along the coast.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
3. The proposed project will serve more than local public needs.
4. The Conservancy has independently reviewed and considered the Mitigated Negative Declaration for the Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park Resource Management Plan, adopted by the Orange County Board of Supervisors on August 4, 2009 under the California Environmental Quality Act and attached to the accompanying staff recommendation as Exhibit 4, and finds that the construction component of the proposed project, as mitigated, avoids, reduces or mitigates the possible significant environmental effects and that there is no substantial evidence that this project will have a significant effect on the environment, as defined in 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15382.”

PROJECT SUMMARY: Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a grant of \$675,000 to the County of Orange (the “County”) for planning and construction of public access improvements at or in the vicinity of the main entryway to Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park (the “Park”), a County owned and managed park. The approximately three-acre project footprint is located in the coastal zone in the City of Laguna Niguel, Orange County (Exhibit 1).

The Park is a popular public park and features some of the most valuable wildlife habitat in Orange County (Exhibit 2) along with 30 miles of trails across 3,300 acres of open space. Unfortunately, the existing primary entryway is degraded and unsightly, and suffers from poor identification, public access conflicts and limited public amenities. The County desires to remedy the situation with several improvements at the site to enhance and manage public access consistent with the *Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park Resource Management Plan* adopted by the County in 2009 (“RMP”) and the Natural Communities Conservation Plan/Habitat Conservation Plan (“NCCP/HCP”) central and coastal sub-region known as the Nature Reserve of Orange County. The RMP calls for specific improvements to the primary entryway including: new entryway and other signage; improved parking lot configuration; new and rehabilitated trails; native plant landscaping; and additional visitor amenities including outdoor gathering areas. The RMP also indicates that the temporary appearance and quality of the existing park ranger station, bathrooms and other public amenities contribute to the problems with the entryway. To remedy this, the County would like to replace the existing trailer serving as the ranger station, as well as a small adjacent modular building used for non-profit organization activities, with new pre-fabricated administrative buildings.

Total estimated cost to implement the entryway improvements, including the visitor-serving and administrative buildings is approximately \$4 million. The County requests the proposed authorization of \$675,000 to cover (1) construction of new trails, parking and circulation improvements, native landscaping, signage, and visitor amenities, and (2) planning and design of new visitor-serving and administrative buildings. The County will provide the balance of funds required to implement the plan.

The anticipated funding source for the proposed authorization is an appropriation to the Conservancy of Proposition 12 funds specifically designated for projects in the South Coast Wilderness region of southern Orange County. The proposed authorization and the Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park Parking Improvements and Trail Planning Project also on the Conservancy's June 20, 2013 meeting agenda will exhaust the remaining Proposition 12 funds allocated to this region. (see the "Project Financing" section for more detail).

Specific project elements of the proposed authorization include the following:

Park entrance: This approximately 6,000 square-foot area will provide a soft shoulder adjacent to the street paving for pedestrians to safely move to designated pedestrian entry points. It will provide a safe ingress/egress area for vehicle access between the street and the parking area. Elements of this area will include soft shoulder, soft entry surfacing, fencing, gates, entrance signage, and native landscape buffer.

Parking area: The existing decomposed granite parking area (approximately 43,560 square feet) will be reconfigured with wood and rock space definers and islands of native plant landscaping to improve circulation, fit in with the surrounding natural environment, and encourage and add additional spaces. Project elements will include an electric vehicle charging station, bike racks/storage, exercise warm up stations, and permeable surfacing.

Entry arrival area and trail: This element will include approximately 6,000 square-feet of gathering space to orient visitors, 250 linear feet of trail, interpretive signage, hard and soft surfacing and rock outcrops for definition, and native landscaping. The new decomposed granite trail will pass the planned new ranger station/visitor center and the existing Native Plant and Historic Artifacts Garden on the way into the Park.

Trail to Aliso Creek Regional Trail: Approximately 700 linear feet of decomposed granite trail will skirt between the existing parking area and upland habitat and provided a needed link to the South Coast Wilderness regional trail system.

Sycamore Grove gathering area: The County will enhance and enlarge an existing gathering area to approximately 10,000 square feet to accommodate large or multiple small group gatherings for outdoor educational activities and events. Elements will include hard and soft surfacing, rock outcrops and landforms for definition and seating and native landscaping.

Visitor Center and Administrative Facilities: Site planning, engineering and architectural design documents, and cost estimates for three pre-fabricated buildings totaling 4,500 square feet that will replace the current temporary structures. A 1,300 square-foot building will serve as a visitor center and ranger offices and accommodate ADA-accessible restrooms. A second 1,300 square-foot building will provide meeting and office space for non-profit organization activities. A 1,900 square-foot building will be used for nature education and training.

All elements of the project will be carried out by the California Conservation Corps, private contractors and County staff. The project will be managed by the County's department of parks, which is known as "OC Parks."

The project as proposed is consistent with the RMP, specifically Section 7 (Public Access) and subsection 7.4 (Proposed Park Entries); subsection 7.4.3 Park Gateway Issues and Design Concepts; and subsection 7.5 Recommendations/Ten-Year Actions. The RMP requires the public access facilities and improvements to "blend in" and be "compatible with the surroundings and in keeping with a wilderness park".

The proposed project also is consistent with the NCCP/HCP implementation agreement, which allows for the development and maintenance of passive recreational facilities, including hiking and biking trails, parking areas, visitor-serving and interpretive facilities.

The project is supported by the City of Laguna Niguel, the City of Laguna Beach, the City of Aliso Viejo, the Laguna Canyon Foundation, Laguna Greenbelt, Inc., and the Orange County Watershed Education Center (Exhibit 3).

Site Description

The Park is located adjacent to the Laguna Coast Wilderness Park in the San Joaquin/Sheep Hills area in unincorporated south Orange County. The Park is part of a greater 22,000-acre open space system known as the South Coast Wilderness, comprising several unique parks and preserves including Crystal Cove State Park and the Laguna Coast Wilderness Park. The Park provides significant trail access and connections to the extensive South Coast Wilderness regional trail network, which 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.

The Park covers 3,873 acres, including the hills, canyons and floodplain surrounding Aliso and Wood Canyons and portions of Laguna Canyon. The landscape ranges from lush, oak woodlands to broad expanses of grassland and coastal sage scrub. The diverse landscape and topography provides spectacular views and opportunities for a variety of visitor experiences. In addition to numerous trails park features include 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 Woods Canyons Wilderness Park”.

Since the passage of Proposition 12, the non-profit Laguna Canyon Foundation (“Foundation”), the City of Laguna Beach (“City”), and the 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 \$11.6 million to the City, the Foundation, the County, and the City of Laguna Woods for Proposition 12 purposes. Projects to date have included acquisition of approximately 310 acres of open space for management as part of the Laguna Coast Wilderness Park; interpretive exhibits for the Nix Nature Center at the Laguna Coast Wilderness Park; a signage program at the Park; and land acquisition support grants to the Foundation.

In addition to the proposed authorization, staff is separately requesting an authorization of \$204,000 to the City for parking improvements and trail planning that will serve the Park. The two proposed authorizations will exhaust the remainder of Proposition 12 funds appropriated to the Conservancy for projects in the South Coast Wilderness.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$675,000
Project Total	\$675,000

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 Woods [*sic*] Canyons Wilderness Park.” The proposed project will enhance public access to and within the Park, a coastal wilderness park, through new trails, parking and circulation improvements, signage, and visitor amenities, and thus the proposed project is an appropriate use of Proposition 12 funds.

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 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 coastline. Section 31400.1 authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to public agencies for development of lands for public access purposes to and along the coast. The proposed grant is consistent with these provisions because it will facilitate and enhance public access to a coastal wilderness park by improving the primary entryway to the Park through construction of new trail trails, parking and circulation improvements, signage, and visitor amenities and through planning of a new park ranger station that will include visitor services and public restrooms. Under § 31400.1, a grant to a local agency must serve more than local public needs. The proposed project will serve more than local needs because will facilitate and enhance public access to the Park, which is a coastal wilderness park of regional and statewide significance.

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 proposed project will help the County enhance public access to and within a coastal wilderness park through construction of new trails, parking and circulation improvements, signage, and visitor amenities and through planning of a new park ranger station that will include visitor services and public restrooms at the primary entryway to the Park.

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

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective 2D** of the Conservancy’s 2013-2018 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will fund reconstruction of dilapidated and unsafe facilities and construction of new facilities to increase and enhance the public access and recreational opportunities of a coastal wilderness park.

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 is supported by the City of Laguna Niguel, the City of Laguna Beach, the City of Aliso Viejo, the Laguna Canyon Foundation, Laguna Greenbelt, Inc., and the Orange County Watershed Education Center.
4. **Location:** The proposed project is located within the coastal zone of the City of Laguna Niguel in Orange County.
5. **Need:** Absent the proposed authorization, the County will not be able to undertake the project because of shrinking capital budgets.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The proposed project will support and enhance access to a coastal wilderness park and the South Coast Wilderness regional system of parks and preserves, which serve 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 its elevation.

Additional Criteria

9. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The project will address multiple issues including access, resource stewardship, and safety.
14. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See “Project History” above.
17. **Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** A county-wide wildlands fire management plan exists to address potential fire risks to the property. Drought is a concern long term; however the coastal sage scrub habitat that comprises the project’s native landscaping palette is highly adapted to drought and will likely persevere through such conditions, which the project and surrounding lands have faced without much incident in past drought years. Adaptive management and informal monitoring by park rangers and natural resource staff will be used to ensure the health of native plants used in landscaping, eradication of invasive species and prevention of trail erosion.
18. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** The design of the project incorporates a strong focus on sustainable products and techniques. The project will incorporate the use of low-carbon fuels and alternative fuel technologies in construction equipment and vehicles; reduce worker and volunteer vehicle miles traveled by encouraging use of carpools/vanpools; and compost waste resulting from habitat restoration on site, if feasible. Native habitat will solely comprise the landscaping palette and be sourced from a local native plant nursery. Decomposed granite will be used in the parking lot reconfiguration and trails rather than hardscape. The parking lot reconfiguration will result in additional parking spaces, but it will include an electric vehicle charging station, and bicycle and pedestrian use will be encouraged through the addition of bike racks and informational materials. Asphalt will be recycled.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The proposed project's footprint lies in the coastal zone, within the City of Laguna Niguel. The California Coastal Commission certified the Local Coastal Program for the City of Laguna Niguel ("LCP") in 1990. The LCP policies applicable to the site of the proposed project are derived from (and still referred to as) the Aliso Creek Planning Unit ("ACPU"), which the County had prepared for this area before it became incorporated.

LCP public access policies and goals for the area of the city that includes the Park are within the ACPU section titled "Public Access and Trails System" (the ACPU sections are not numbered). This section states that "a proposed greenbelt trail and access system is intended to afford maximum public access to and within the greenbelt, consistent with resource protection and a high quality of diverse recreational experiences." The Park is within the greenbelt referred to in this section. The section includes the following specific provisions that are intended to support "regional access to the greenbelt from all surrounding communities and connections with other regional trail systems":

Subsection (a) requires access to the greenbelt "be provided at a level consistent with protection of natural resources in order to enhance enjoyment and use of the natural environment and recreational opportunities".

Subsection (d) states "Adequate parking shall be provided at selected points of access to serve visitors to the greenbelt and its uses and to make possible nonautomotive modes of movement through the greenbelt".

Subsection (e) requires paved surfaces "be located and designed to minimize modification of natural conditions, with emphasis on park standard, permeable roads".

Subsection (f) requires identification of "selected points of access or staging areas....as gateways or major access points at locations suitable for high-intensity use and entry".

The proposed project elements as described in the "Project Summary" section are consistent with the policies of the LCP in that they will facilitate and enhance public access to the Park, thereby maximizing public access and providing a high quality recreational experience for the public. Further, the project will improve a major access point, the primary access to the Park, through parking improvements as well as through new and enhanced hiking and biking trails, picnic and other gathering areas and design of a new ranger station. Additionally, the proposed new trails will enhance the connectivity of the Park to the regional pedestrian and bicycle trail network that provides access to and along the coast within the South Coast Wilderness system of parks and preserves. Accordingly, the proposed project is consistent with the LCP.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The RMP identifies allowable uses in the Park and provides for the management of resources in conjunction with the public recreational uses. The management activities identified in the RMP include the construction component of the proposed project (i.e., all of the proposed work with the exception of the planning for the new administrative buildings). Although the RMP identifies the need for, and benefit of, replacing the existing ranger station and bathrooms, it does not include plans for such work. The Orange County Board of Supervisors approved the RMP and adopted the Mitigated Negative Declaration (MND) and Mitigation and Monitoring

Reporting Program for the RMP on August 4, 2009 (MND IP 08-269, Exhibit 4). Because one of the primary purposes of the RMP is the management of resources to maximize habitat value within the park, there generally are no adverse significant environmental effects associated with the RMP. Nevertheless, the proposed public uses, including the access improvements, have the potential to adversely affect some resources. The MND identifies these potential impacts and the mitigation measures that will reduce these potential impacts to an insignificant level. The mitigation measures include: reviews and surveys (design and pre-construction), avoidance (sensitive or endangered wildlife vegetation and nesting season), and archaeological and paleontological procedures and monitoring (pre-construction and during construction) to avoid and minimize resource impacts.

Accordingly, Conservancy staff recommends that the Conservancy find that the construction component of the proposed project as mitigated will not have a significant effect on the environment, as defined in 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15382.

The planning component of the proposed project, which consists of site planning, engineering and architectural designs for two pre-fabricated buildings totaling 3,100 square feet, is not explicitly identified in the RMP; however, it is statutorily and categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (“CEQA”) under two sections of the CEQA Guidelines, 14 Cal. Code of Regulations §§15000, et seq. The planning is statutorily exempt as provided in Section 15262 because it will involve only feasibility and planning analysis for possible future action that has not yet been adopted, approved or funded and it will include consideration of environmental factors. The planning is categorically exempt pursuant to Section 15306 to the extent that it involves basic data collection and resource evaluation activities.

Staff will file a Notice of Determination and Notice of Exemption upon Conservancy approval of the project.