

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
October 1, 2015

**ALISO AND WOOD CANYONS WILDERNESS PARK
VISITOR CENTER**

Project No. 13-010-02
Project Manager: Deborah Ruddock

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$1,000,000 to the County of Orange for construction of a visitor center at the entryway to the Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park in the City of Laguna Niguel in Orange County.

LOCATION: City of Laguna Niguel, Orange County (Exhibit 1)

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Public Access

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location](#)
 - Exhibit 2: [Project Site Aerial Photo](#)
 - Exhibit 3: [Park Photos](#)
 - Exhibit 4: [Project Letters](#)
 - Exhibit 5: [Mitigated Negative Declaration](#)
 - Exhibit 6: [LSA Memos](#)
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RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31400-31410 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of one million dollars (\$1,000,000) to the County of Orange (“County”) for construction of a visitor-serving and administrative building, subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of Conservancy funds, 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 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.”
3. The County shall implement feasible best management practices to reduce the project’s greenhouse gas emissions.

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 – 31410), 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 6, and finds that 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.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a grant of \$1,000,000 to the County of Orange (“County”) to assist with construction of a visitor center at the main entryway to Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park (“Park”), a County-owned and managed park located in the coastal zone in the City of Laguna Niguel (Exhibit 1).

The 3,873-acre Park is a popular public park and features some of the most valuable wildlife habitat in Orange County. Surrounded by an urban area with a resident population of more than 600,000, the Park features 35 potential points of entry and more than 30 miles of trails. In 2014 the Park served approximately 188,000 visitors, according to County reports.

The proposed project consists of construction of a 2,500 square-foot modular building to replace the current ranger office/visitor center housed in a single-wide trailer adjacent to the project site. The County will match Conservancy grant funds with a \$1 million cash contribution.

In addition to providing office space for rangers and administrative functions, the new building will support access to the Park via wheelchair-accessible restrooms and information and interpretive displays for educating and orienting visitors to Park resources. The building also will provide space for Park volunteer meetings, training, and equipment storage.

The proposed visitor center will be the first building of a planned three-building campus at the Park’s main gateway. Two future buildings will replace a second existing trailer to provide

multipurpose education and meeting space and offices for environmental non-profit organizations (Exhibit 2). The County completed architectural plans and construction documents for the campus with help from a \$675,000 Coastal Conservancy grant approved in 2013. This earlier Conservancy grant helped the County cover expenses for other Park entryway improvements, completed in spring of 2015, including construction of new trail connections, parking and circulation improvements, signage, native vegetation landscaping, recycled water irrigation, and visitor gathering areas (Exhibit 3).

All Park improvements must be consistent with the *Initial Study/Mitigated Negative Declaration Resource Management Plan for Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park* (MND; IP 08-2009; see “Compliance with CEQA” section below) and the *Resource Management Plan for Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park* (“RMP”). As discussed in the RMP and MND, much of the Park is within the *Central/Coastal Orange County Sub-Region Natural Communities Conservation Plan/Habitat Conservation Plan* (“NCCP/HCP”), and preparation of the RMP was a requirement of the County’s participation in the NCCP/NCP. The purpose of the RMP is to identify allowable uses in the park and provide for the management of the resources in conjunction with public access. Because public access has the potential to adversely affect some resources, the RMP identifies goals and management strategies to ensure that the location of Park gateways, as well as recreational trails, trailheads, and visitor-serving facilities, are carefully chosen and developed to minimize impacts to special status species and their habitats.

The RMP states, “The gateways are critical for setting standards of conduct, directing the public to the various potential destinations and in explaining the purpose of the Park and the richness and sensitivities of its resources. In review of the existing trail system including authorized trails, unauthorized and new desirable trails, the points of entry become a key focus for how to make a successful trail system work – especially with all the existing and potential points of entry into the park.”

Prior to improvements recently completed under the previous Conservancy grant, the primary Park entryway was challenged by unsightly appearance, lack of signage identifying it as the main entrance, poor site layout resulting in access conflicts and chaotic parking and traffic circulation, and limited public and interpretive amenities. Consistent with RMP Section 7 (Public Access), 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 proposed project in combination with recent improvements will reinforce the site’s identity as the main Park gateway; enhance and support public access by creating a more attractive, enjoyable, and informative place for residents and visitors; provide space for interpretive services to deepen appreciation for the Park’s intrinsic values; and be located, designed, and constructed to “blend in” and be “compatible with the surroundings and in keeping with a wilderness park”.

The project is supported by State Senator Patricia Bates, City of Laguna Niguel, City of Aliso Viejo, City of Laguna Woods, City of Laguna Hills, Orange Coast Watershed and Environmental Center, Coastal Greenbelt Authority, Laguna Greenbelt, Inc., and Laguna Canyon Foundation (Exhibit 4).

Site Description: Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park is located adjacent to the Laguna Coast Wilderness Park in the San Joaquin/Sheep Hills area in south Orange County. The Park is part of the greater 22,000-acre South Coast Wilderness, which comprises 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 stretching 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 AWCP: 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".

Beginning with the passage of Proposition 12, the Conservancy, the non-profit Laguna Canyon Foundation ("Foundation"), the City of Laguna Beach ("City"), and Orange County worked together and with the public and major conservation organizations to identify, prioritize and complete projects resulting in a broad range of public and environmental benefits. As of June 30, 2015 all the Proposition 12 appropriation to the Conservancy had been expended. Projects 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 Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park; planning and construction of the Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park entryway improvements discussed in the Project Summary; planning and design of Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park trail connections in neighboring Laguna Beach; and land acquisition support grants to the Foundation.

The proposed authorization is to use Proposition 84 funds to construct one of the buildings that was designed for the Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park entryway with funding through the previous Conservancy grant to the County of Proposition 12 funds.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy

\$1,000,000

Orange County	\$1,000,000
Project Total	\$2,000,000

The anticipated source of funding for the Conservancy's grant is a 2010-2011 appropriation to the Conservancy of funds made available by the Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006 ("Proposition 84," Public Resources Code Section 75001 et seq.). Proposition 84 funds may be used for projects and expenditures that promote access to and enjoyment of the coastal resources of the state and that are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code. The proposed project will improve visitor support and accessibility at a coastal wilderness park with the goal of enhancing the public's enjoyment of the park's natural and recreational resources. (Public Resources Code Section 75060(a). The proposed project is consistent with Division 21 as described below. Accordingly, the proposed project is an appropriate use of Proposition 84 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. 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. The proposed grant is consistent with these provisions because the project, construction of a visitor center, will improve visitor support and public accessibility at an existing coastal wilderness park. The new facility will be located at the Park's main entryway, which serves as the hub of an extensive trail network providing access to and within the park and along the Orange County coastline. It will include ranger offices, an information center and interpretive exhibits orienting visitors to the Park's trail and natural resources, and accessible restrooms consistent with the federal Americans with Disabilities Act ("ADA").

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 it will facilitate and enhance public access to the Park, which is a coastal wilderness park of regional and statewide significance.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ACCESS PROGRAM STANDARDS:

Standard No. 1, Protect Public and Coastal Resources: The proposed visitor center is consistent with Access Program Standard No. 1.

The proposed project, which is located at the Park's main entrance, will safely accommodate public use. The Park is subject to a County-approved Resources Management Plan ("RMP"), which identifies visitor-serving facilities as allowable uses. The proposed facility will replace an

aging office trailer, be fully ADA-compliant with indoor restrooms instead of portable toilets, and will be staffed by park rangers. It will be served by a large recently constructed parking lot designed to accommodate anticipated increases in park usage.

The new single-story building will be elevated on piers to minimize land alteration, yet it will not block significant view corridors. The structure will be fabricated at an off-site facility to reduce construction impacts to park resources, ambiance, and air quality. There is no residential development in the area, eliminating privacy impacts as a concern.

As discussed in the “Project Summary”, “Compliance with Local Coastal Program Policies”, and “Compliance with CEQA” sections of this report, the proposed project as mitigated will not have significant impacts to coastal resources

Standard No. 12, Support Facilities: The proposed project is consistent with this standard in that the facility will support public use of the trails in the Park. The proposed project will augment the recently completed trail-support amenities at the same location including an enlarged parking area with bike racks, visitor gathering areas with seating and picnic tables, trash and recycling receptacles, and gateway, directional and interpretive signage. The visitor center will include indoor ADA-compliant restrooms.

Standard No. 13, Barrier-Free Access: The proposed project is consistent with this standard in that restrooms in the new facility will meet the requirements for barrier-free access of Title 24 of the California Administrative Code. Access to the building will be provided by wheelchair-accessible trails and ramp.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S 2013 STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S), AS REVISED JUNE 25, 2015:

Consistent with **Goal 1, Objective 1F** of the Conservancy’s 2013-2018 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will improve a facility that supports public use of trails in a coastal wilderness park through construction of a visitor center at the Park’s main entrance, and will include ADA-compliant restrooms thereby improving accessibility for people with disabilities.

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective 2D**, the proposed project will fund construction of a visitor center that will 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 October 2, 2014, 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. **Promotion and implementation of state plans and policies:** The proposed project implements the NCCP/HCP. Begun under the State’s Natural Community Conservation Planning Act of 1991, California’s NCCP program is a cooperative effort to identify and provide for regional or area wide protection of plants, animals, and their habitats, while allowing compatible and appropriate economic activity. Much of the Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park, including the proposed project site, is covered by the NCCP/HCP. The NCCP/HCP requires a Resource Management Plan (“RMP”) as a condition for the County’s participation in the NCCP/HCP. The purpose of the RMP is to identify allowable uses in the Park and provide for the management of the resources in conjunction with public access. NCCP/HCP guidelines allow for the development and maintenance of visitor-serving and interpretive facilities, as well as hiking and biking trails and parking areas; consistent with these guidelines, the RMP includes the proposed visitor center at the Park’s main entryway as part of an overall management strategy to implement the NCCP/HMP.
4. **Support of the public:** The project is supported by State Senator Patricia Bates, City of Laguna Niguel, City of Aliso Viejo, City of Laguna Woods, City of Laguna Hills, Orange Coast Watershed and Environmental Center, Coastal Greenbelt Authority, Laguna Greenbelt, Inc., and Laguna Canyon Foundation (Exhibit 4).
5. **Location: The proposed project** is located within the coastal zone of the City of Laguna Niguel in Orange County.
6. **Need:** Absent the proposed authorization, the County will not have sufficient funds to complete the project in a timely manner.
7. **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.
8. **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

Leverage: The Conservancy grant of \$1,000,000 will leverage a \$1,000,000 contribution from the County.

Readiness: The County completed architectural drawings and construction documents for the visitor center under a previous Conservancy grant and is in a position to move forward with the project quickly upon board authorization.

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

Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise: Droughts and increased wildfire risks are expected to accompany climate change. The visitor center will incorporate water-conserving features and installed landscaping will use recycled water irrigation. A county-wide wildlands fire management plan exists to address potential fire risks to the Park’s landscape and infrastructure.

Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions: The proposed 2,500 square-foot visitor center will be prefabricated offsite at an existing manufacturing facility to minimize construction and construction-related greenhouse gas emissions and vehicle miles traveled. Construction of most of the structure in a factory setting will reduce the amount of waste significantly. The building will incorporate a durable, low-maintenance synthetic product (exterior walls and decking) that is made from rice husks, common salt, and mineral oil (Resysta), thereby reusing a food waste that would go to a landfill. Additionally the construction waste is 100% recyclable. There will be no significant paving at the site and there will be minimal concrete site work associated with the project. The primary use of concrete will be for the structural pier foundation. All new connections from the building to existing trails will be decomposed granite. Building and site design incorporate natural lighting and ventilation to reduce the need for electricity, lighting, and air conditioning. The electrical design exceeds California Title 24 requirements by more than 15%. All lighting in the design is LED. Passive heating and cooling will be accomplished with exterior sunshades and louvers, and operable windows include large roll-up garage door type windows. Numerous trees in the area, which are a defining characteristic of the site, make it extremely challenging to incorporate solar heating efficiently, but the County is exploring a solar water heating system. The project site is served by local public transportation and also connects to a regional hiking and biking trail used by commuters and recreational riders and hikers. The newly constructed parking area serving the facility has an electric vehicle charging station and bike racks. Educational and informational material will be developed to encourage more bike and pedestrian travel to the facility and Park.

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 (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 is consistent with the policies of the LCP in that the improved visitor support and public accessibility provided by the new visitor center at the main park entrance will increase enjoyment and use of the park, thereby maximizing public access.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

Much of the Park is included within the NCCP/HCP, which required the County to prepare and adopt the RMP as a condition of its participation in the program. One of the purposes of the RMP is to manage the Park's resources to maximize habitat value. The RMP includes the proposed project. The County adopted the *Initial Study/Mitigated Negative Declaration for the Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park Resource Management Plan* ("MND") on August 4, 2009. Two letters dated August 11, 2015 from LSA Associates, Inc., the consultant who prepared the MND, confirm that although the proposed project is slightly larger than described in the MND, there are no new significant environmental effects and no increase in severity of previously identified environmental effects. (Exhibit 6). Further, no changed circumstances or new information has been identified that would trigger the need for additional CEQA review

The MND considers the effects of all public access improvements in the RMP collectively; these improvements are the trails, the three-building campus that includes the proposed visitor center and the other main entryway improvements. The MND identifies potentially significant environmental effects of these public access improvements in the areas of biological resources, geological effects and cultural resources.

Biological Resources: The public access improvements could require removal of southern coastal sage scrub, which is habitat for numerous animals, including the endangered coastal California gnatcatcher and least Bell's vireo. This impact will be mitigated to less than significant by the Park's inclusion in the NCCP/HCP and by compliance with NCCP/HCP guidelines, which include regulatory consultation as to final project location to minimize impacts to coastal sage scrub, prohibiting vegetation removal and construction during the primary bird nesting season, re-vegetation, and use of a biological monitor during construction.

Geological Impacts/Seismic Related Ground Failure and Liquefaction: The public access improvements in the Park could expose visitors to seismic-related ground failure, including due to liquefaction and to landslides. This effect is mitigated to less than significant through a requirement for a geotechnical report and compliance with all recommendations of the report in final design plans. The geotechnical report has been prepared and the recommendations have been followed in the architect's three-building site plan and design of the buildings, including the pier foundations. The report's analysis addressed site seismicity, foundation design parameters, anticipated settlement, groundwater, and liquefaction. Regarding movement of the buildings due to seismic activity, the report states: "Since the buildings are relatively small, the soil mass within the individual footprint of each building will move uniformly together and differential lateral movement would be negligible."

Cultural Resources: The Park is known to contain sensitive cultural resources, including historical, archaeological and paleontological resources. Impacts of the RMP on these resources will be mitigated to less than significant through three mitigation measures that include retention of an archaeologist and a paleontologist to monitor excavation activities and halting of activities to take appropriate actions in the event such resources are discovered. Subsequent to adoption of

the MND, the County mapped the Park's main entryway (i.e., the project site) and determined that the proposed visitor center is outside of a 50-foot buffer from an identified culturally sensitive area. Should the County or its contractors discover unknown archaeological or paleontological resources during the construction process, in accordance with the MND mitigation measures, it will halt or redirect work, and avoid impacts through redesign, expert consultation, salvage as appropriate, and monitoring.

Conservancy staff has independently reviewed and considered the RMP, MND, and the two LSA letters and concurs with the County's finding that the construction of the visitor center as mitigated will not have a significant effect on the environment. Accordingly, staff recommends that the Conservancy find that the proposed project as mitigated will not have a significant effect on the environment.

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