

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

April 27, 2017

El Monte Youth Recreation Center Urban Greening Project

Project No. 16-059-01

Project Manager: Megan Cooper

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$406,282 to Amigos de los Rios to design and implement an urban greening project at the El Monte Youth Recreation Center in the City of El Monte, Los Angeles County.

LOCATION: El Monte, Los Angeles County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Integrated Coastal and Marine Resource Protection

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Maps](#)

Exhibit 2: [Project Design](#)

Exhibit 3: [Site Photos](#)

Exhibit 4: [Support Letters](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Section 31220 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of up to \$406,282 to Amigos de los Rios (the “grantee”) to design and implement an urban greening project at the El Monte Youth Recreation Center in Los Angeles County. Prior to the disbursement of funds, the grantee shall submit for the review and written approval of the Conservancy’s Executive Officer:

1. A work program, including budget and schedule, and any contractors to be employed for these work program tasks;
2. A plan for installation of signage acknowledging Conservancy funding; and
3. A signed agreement with the City of El Monte and the Mountain View School District allowing the grantee to implement and maintain 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 authorization is consistent with Chapter 5.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding integrated coastal and marine resource protection.
 2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
 3. Amigos de los Rios is a nonprofit organization existing under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, and whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.”
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PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize the disbursement of up to \$406,282 to Amigos de los Rios (“the grantee”) to design and implement an urban greening project at the El Monte Youth Recreation Center in the City of El Monte, Los Angeles County.

The El Monte Youth Recreation Center Green Infrastructure Project (“project”) will improve environmental quality and park access in the City of El Monte. The project site is currently an unused recreation center that is owned and was previously managed by the City of El Monte and was closed to the public in 2012 due to gang activity. In 2014, the Mountain View School District assumed management of the site, and has secured the funding to remodel the interior of the building. The proposed project would complement the school district’s project by using green infrastructure to create a safe and beautiful park on the grounds of the recreation center. The park at the recreation center is one of the few parks available to residents of the City of El Monte. The reopening of the improved recreation center will provide educational, after school and community programming that is much-needed in this community. In addition, the native vegetation, shade trees and walking path that will be installed as part of the project will provide much needed green space in an urban heat island with very little access to open space.

Tasks involved in this project include completion of project design, permitting, and implementation of the project. The grantee will clear grass to reduce water and fertilizer use, regrade flat areas to create concave rain gardens, remove invasive, drought-intolerant plants, and plant 100 native and drought-tolerant trees and 1,700 shrubs. The grantee will remove hardscape in strategic low areas to direct water flow, install permeable surfaces to improve filtration, install trashcans, and install bioswales around the perimeter of the site to promote infiltration of polluted runoff to improve water quality in the Los Angeles River and the ocean. The project will also include the installation of culturally-relevant watershed interpretive elements that will provide educational opportunities for youth participants in the programs at the recreation center, their families, and the general public. This project will proactively engage local youth and their families in the design, installation and monitoring.

The City of El Monte is located in eastern Los Angeles in the San Gabriel Valley. Residents of eastern Los Angeles County suffer from an “asphalt quilt” of heat islands, poor water and air quality, and lack of access to green spaces and recreation. The San Gabriel Valley lacks permeable surfaces, so runoff carries pollutants to storm drains, where these pollutants are carried to the ocean. In addition, a lack of urban forestry and unpaved areas raises temperatures, negatively impacting health, especially harming sensitive populations such as youth, elderly, and

the poor. The Trust for Public Land defines an area as “park deficient” if it has less than 3 acres of parks per 1,000 residents. The City of El Monte’s General Plan found that the City has 0.41 acres of park space per 1,000 residents, making it very deficient of park space.

This project is part of Amigos de los Rios’ Emerald Necklace network, which seeks to create a sustainable, healthy L.A. through multi-objective, water-sensitive parks in underserved urban communities. These projects incorporate Low-Impact Development elements to enhance water quality through runoff infiltration, while providing beautiful, safe parks for public enjoyment.

Following completion of the project, the grantee and its citizen science volunteers from the local community will calculate the square footage of grass, concrete and asphalt removed. These measurements will allow them to calculate the difference in before and after-project volume capacity for polluted runoff capture. They will also monitor tree and shrub growth, and track progress towards water savings and water quality improvement goals. They will calculate polluted runoff mitigation using calculations based on area of land enhanced through Low-Impact Development, and through the ITREES Database, which tracks aggregate benefits of trees over time. These measurements will help track polluted runoff mitigation. In addition to critical water quality improvements, they will track benefits like improved air quality and heat island mitigation, many of which are measured by the ITREES Database.

The Mountain View School District will maintain the project area in the long-term as part of regular facility maintenance. The grantee will collaborate with California Conservation Corps and local Youth Corps members and will host volunteer stewardship events to implement the project and empower community participation. Community members will assist with site preparation, habitat restoration and urban forestry.

Amigos de los Rios has been committed to protecting and restoring open space in the urban environment throughout the Los Angeles Basin for over past thirteen years. They have raised over \$40 million in competitive grant funds and completed 13 multi-objective park and urban forestry projects. They have an excellent record of working closely with the public to improve parks and open space in vulnerable communities.

Site Description: The project is located in the City of El Monte, in the watersheds of both the Los Angeles and San Gabriel Rivers (see Exhibit 1). The site consists of a rectangular two-acre parcel located on Mountain View Road, a major thoroughfare in El Monte. The recreation center is an 18,000 square foot building surrounded by impermeable concrete and asphalt. The site currently has a decommissioned play structure that will be removed, and a large rectangular patch of grass that will be removed in key places to install native vegetation and trees, while some of the grass will remain as a soccer field. The grantee will install a permeable walking path around the perimeter of the site to encourage active recreation. The recreation center will provide community services such as after school programs, community classes, food distribution and a cool environment for residents to use during extremely hot days.

Project History: The grantee proposed this project on June 30, 2016 during the Los Angeles County Urban Greening round of Proposition 1 funding (i.e. the Water Quality, Supply, and Infrastructure Improvement Act of 2014). This project is part of Amigos de los Rios’ Emerald Necklace network, which seeks to create a sustainable, healthy L.A. through multi-objective,

water-sensitive parks in underserved urban communities. The grantee completed the Emerald Necklace Expanded Green Infrastructure Plan in 2014, funded in part by the Strategic Growth Council, which identified the current project as a link in the 1,500 interconnected greenways around the Rio Hondo, San Gabriel and Lower Los Angeles Rivers.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$406,282
<u>Others</u>	<u>\$6,000</u>
Project Total	\$412,282

The anticipated source of funding for the proposed project is the fiscal year 2016 appropriation from the Water Quality, Supply, and Infrastructure Improvement Act of 2014 (Proposition 1, Water Code § 79700 *et seq*). Funds appropriated to the Conservancy derive from Chapter 6 of the Act (commencing with § 79730) and may be used “for multi-benefit water quality, water supply, and watershed protection and restoration projects for the watersheds of the state” (Section 79731). More specifically, the proposed project will help achieve three of the thirteen Chapter 6 purposes outlined in Section 79732(a), including:

- “Implement watershed adaptation projects in order to reduce the impacts of climate change on communities and ecosystems” (79732(a)(2)) by planning and designing green infrastructure elements to reduce impacts of climate change in the watershed;
- “Protect and restore rural and urban watershed health to improve watershed storage capacity, forest health, protection of life and property, storm water resource management, and greenhouse gas reduction” (79732(a)(9)) by planning and designing green infrastructure elements aimed to capture freshwater in a more natural and efficient manner; and
- “Reduce pollution or contamination of rivers, lakes, streams, or coastal waters, prevent and remediate mercury contamination from legacy mines, and protect or restore natural system functions that contribute to water supply, water quality, or flood management” (79732(a)(11)) by naturally cleaning storm water and recharging the groundwater via soil infiltration.

The proposed project was reviewed and subsequently recommended for funding through a competitive grant process under the Conservancy’s *Proposition 1 Grant Program Guidelines* adopted in June 2015 (“Prop 1 Guidelines”). The proposed Project meets each of the evaluation criteria in the Prop 1 Guidelines as described in further detail in the following sections of this staff recommendation: “Project Financing” and “Project Summary” (sections above) and “Consistency with Conservancy’s Project Selection Criteria & Guidelines” (section below).

The grantee will provide a \$6,000 match from Southern California Edison and \$51,449 as an in-kind contribution of staff time and resources to the project.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project will be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 3 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation (Public Resource Code Section 31113), and Chapter 5.5, integrated coastal and marine resources protection (Public Resources Code Section 31220).

Section 31113 permits the Conservancy to address the impacts and potential impacts of climate change on resources within its jurisdiction. Pursuant to this authorization, the proposed project will increase carbon sequestration levels, reduce the urban heat island effect of an urban area, and improve water quality.

Section 31220 permits the Conservancy to provide grants for coastal watershed and coastal and marine habitat water quality, sediment management, and living marine resources protection and restoration projects. As required by Section 31220, staff has notified the State Water Resources Control Board of the nature of the Project and provided the opportunity for comment, input and review. Pursuant to Sections 31220(b)(1) and (7), the Conservancy is authorized to undertake a project or award a grant for a project that reduces contamination of waters within the coastal zone or marine waters and that reduces the impact of population and economic pressures on coastal and marine resources. By installing green infrastructure in the watersheds of the Los Angeles and San Gabriel Rivers, the proposed project will help improve water quality of coastal waters and reduce the impacts of dense population along the Los Angeles coast. As required by Section 31220(c), the project includes a monitoring and evaluation component, described in the Project Summary section above, and is consistent with the local watershed management plan as described in the "Consistency with Local Watershed Management Plan/State Water Quality Control Plan" section below.

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

Consistent with **Goal 7, Objective G** of the Conservancy's 2013-2018 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will implement tree and vegetation planting projects to reduce the urban heat island effect and provide multiple benefits such as enhanced storm water management and an improved quality of life.

Additionally, the proposed project is consistent with two of the major efforts outlined in the 2013-2018 Strategic Plan for the South Coast program including "[c]ollaborate with the City and County of Los Angeles on green infrastructure projects to address water quality and supply issues" and "implement tree planting and other multi-benefit projects which reduce the heat island effect in urban areas."

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 is consistent with the following state plans and policies promoting global climate change resilience and adaptation in watershed management:
 - a. The proposed project will implement the *California Water Action Plan* (Governor’s Office of Planning and Research, 2014) by improving water quality in the LA River.
 - b. The proposed project will implement the *California @ 50 Million: The Environmental Goals and Policy Report* (Governor’s Office of Planning and Research, 2013 Draft) by developing mechanisms to reduce freshwater run-off, improve water quality, promote climate change resilience, and develop healthy, equitable, and sustainable communities.
 - c. The proposed project will implement the *California Climate Adaptation Strategy/Safeguarding California: Reducing Climate Risk Plan* (CA Natural Resources Agency, July 2014) by promoting climate change resilience with its efforts to expand urban forestry.
 - d. The proposed project will implement the *California Wildlife Action Plan* (CA Department of Fish and Wildlife, 2015) by planting native vegetation and, and reducing freshwater run-off.
4. **Support of the public:** This project was developed collaboratively with the Mountain View School District, which has management responsibility for the site. As part of the greater Emerald Necklace Expanded Vision Plan, this project has support of the Emerald Necklace Coalition of Agencies, comprising 48 signatory municipalities, agencies, school districts, and other stakeholders with the singular goal of enhancing and expanding the Emerald Necklace Vision. The El Monte High School District, San Gabriel Mountains Forever (SGMF), Bike San Gabriel Valley, and Evan Brooks Associates also support this project (see Exhibit 4).
5. **Location:** The project is located in the City of El Monte in eastern Los Angeles County. It is between the Rio Hondo (a tributary to the LA River) and the San Gabriel River (see Exhibit 1).
6. **Need:** The Mountain View School District does not have the financial capacity to implement this project. Conservancy funds are needed because projects such as this will demonstrate to the School District and the City of El Monte that native plants and water quality measures can be implemented and maintained in their parks, which will inspire them to implement more of these projects in the future.
7. **Greater-than-local interest:** As part of the regional Emerald Necklace, this project will foster greater connections between underserved eastern Los Angeles County and the other cities along the LA River. This green infrastructure transformation project will provide opportunities for El Monte community members to participate and experience, learn from, and enjoy a

microcosm of the region's natural resources. In addition, this project will provide an important demonstration for other municipalities around the State to pursue urban greening techniques.

8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The proposed project area is not vulnerable to sea level rise.

Additional Criteria

9. **Urgency:** The grantee has begun working with the City of El Monte on permitting and necessary permissions and would like to begin work as soon as possible in order to take advantage of current momentum.
10. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The proposed project will have multiple benefits including increased climate change resiliency, improved public health and quality of life, and increased local water independence.
11. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
13. **Innovation:** Removal of permeable surfaces, rain gardens, bioswales and urban forestry using native vegetation have been tested in multiple settings throughout Los Angeles, but are still uncommon in broad implementation, or in depth within a given community. In the City of El Monte, they are highly innovative and new solutions.
14. **Readiness:** The grantee has begun working on approvals from the City and is ready to begin work on the project right away.
15. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** "See "Project History" above."
17. **Cooperation:** The grantee is working closely with the Mountain View School District, and will collaborate with local Youth Corps members and host Emerald Necklace Volunteer Stewardship events to implement the project and empower community participation. Youth Corps Members and Emerald Necklace Volunteers will assist with site preparation, habitat restoration and urban forestry.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The City of El Monte is not located within the coastal zone and does not have an LCP. The project does, however, align with the El Monte Individual Watershed Management Program (see below).

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL WATERSHED MANAGEMENT PLAN/ STATE WATER QUALITY CONTROL PLAN:

The City of El Monte is covered under the El Monte Individual Watershed Management Program. This plan requires the use of Best Management Practices to reduce nutrient and trash loads in runoff pollution, specifically calling for Low Impact Development measures that incorporate stormwater capture, re-use, and infiltration. This project will align directly with the goals of this Watershed Management Program.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

This project is categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (“CEQA”) pursuant to 14 Cal. Code Regs. Section 15304, Minor Alterations to Land. Section 15304 exempts minor alterations in the condition of land and vegetation that do not involve the removal of healthy, mature, scenic trees. The examples include replacement of existing conventional landscaping with water resistant landscaping. This exemption applies to the project because it consists of minor alterations to the land and vegetation of the El Monte Youth Recreation Center, including replacement of lawn and hardscape areas with native plants, rain gardens and bioswales, without removing any healthy, mature, scenic trees. Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon approval.