

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

April 27, 2017

**URBAN FORESTRY AND HABITAT RESTORATION AT DEBS PARK**

Project No. 16-050-01

Project Manager: Sam Jenniches

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$300,000 to North East Trees to prepare final designs and implement an urban forestry and habitat restoration project at Ernest E. Debs Regional Park in Los Angeles County.

**LOCATION:** Ernest E. Debs Regional Park, City of Los Angeles, Los Angeles County

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Integrated Coastal and Marine Resource Protection

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**EXHIBITS**

Exhibit 1: [Project Maps](#)

Exhibit 2: [Project Photos](#)

Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)

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**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 three hundred thousand dollars (\$300,000) to North East Trees to prepare final designs and implement an urban forestry and habitat restoration project at Ernest E. Debs Regional Park in Los Angeles County, subject to the following condition:

1. Prior to the disbursement of funds, the grantee shall submit for the review and written approval of the Conservancy’s Executive Officer a work program, including budget and schedule; any contractors to be retained for project work; a written agreement with the City of Los Angeles authorizing the grantee to implement and maintain the project; a plan for installation of signage acknowledging Conservancy funding; and documentation that all funds needed to complete the project have been secured.

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:

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1. The proposed authorization is consistent with Chapter 5.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding integrated coastal and marine resources protection.
  2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
  3. North East Trees 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 that the Conservancy authorize disbursement of up to \$300,000 to North East Trees (NET) to prepare final designs and implement an urban forestry and habitat restoration project (“project”) at Ernest E. Debs Regional Park (Debs Park) in the city of Los Angeles.

The project consists of preparation of final designs; permitting light corrective grading; invasive plant removal; planting of native trees and plants; propagation of native, vernal pool ecosystem plants; installation of topography that assists water infiltration; and installation of temporary low-flow irrigation systems for plant establishment. NET will work with local at risk youth at all stages of implementation. The project will restore 4.5 acres in the southeastern end of the 282-acre Debs Park, which is adjacent to Rose Hill Park and the Montecito Heights neighborhood. NET is working with the City of Los Angeles Department of Parks and Recreation to address the long-term maintenance of the project. After establishing a pre-implementation baseline, NET will monitor the effectiveness of the project with respect to prevention of soil erosion, stormwater quality, carbon sequestration and any changes in park visitor use.

Due to prolonged drought and an increasingly greater number of heat days, vegetation at the park is showing signs of stress. Non-native trees and vegetation are exhibiting greater distress with signs of disease, and in many cases, tree loss. Invasive/exotic species such as tree of heaven are running rampant and are taking over large areas of the park. Evidence indicates that the lack of rainfall, warmer temperatures associated with climate change and factors such as poor air quality are contributing to the decline of various tree species. Eucalyptus and non-native pine, which are vulnerable to attack from insect pests, are in particular decline. As these trees continue to decline, it is imperative to replace them with native trees and plants that have adapted to local conditions. It is essential to increase tree canopy cover and native understory plants in the vast bare areas of the park, and optimize opportunities to restore the park’s natural habitat.

The communities surrounding Debs Park represent some of the most vulnerable populations in terms of resilience to climate change. The *Social Vulnerability Index* for Census Tracts in California identifies over 98% of the surrounding areas as treeless; over 64% of the land cover as impervious; over 68% of the population as low income; over 45% with no high school diploma; over 41% foreign born; over 11% over the age of 65 yrs and living alone; over 66% of the youth as being obese or overweight; and over 95% of the population as being of color or non-white.

Debs Park is the largest accessible open natural green space in the area for tens of thousands of residents within the surrounding communities. These residents typically do not have the means or the capacity to venture from their local neighborhoods in order to visit many of the

recreational opportunities and open spaces along the coast or in the mountains of Southern California. Members of this population have rarely, if ever, been to the beach or to the nearby national forests. Debs Park represents the only site within this largely developed, highly-urbanized area that can provide the opportunity to meaningfully sequester carbon, mitigate the urban heat island effect, combat air and water pollution, and reduce the effects of GHG emissions whilst helping to prepare the community for the impacts of climate change.

North East Trees (NET) is a 501(c)(3) non-profit community-based organization. Since 1989, NET has been restoring nature’s services throughout the resource challenged communities of the greater Los Angeles area by planting trees and constructing parks, trails and greenways. Their key objective is to involve, hire and train local at-risk youth providing them with skills and a path to higher education and jobs in the green industry, and to increase community involvement and awareness about environmental challenges while bringing nature back into the highly urbanized environment of Los Angeles. Throughout its history, NET has regularly collaborated with the City of Los Angeles to implement urban forestry and low impact development projects and has been a key partner in working to further the Million Trees Los Angeles program as well as other green infrastructure projects endorsed by the city of Los Angeles.

**Site Description:** The project area is at the southern end of Debs Park and is bordered to the east, south and west by disadvantaged communities in the Montecito Heights neighborhood of Los Angeles. It is adjacent to Rose Hill Park, which offers active recreation opportunities. The project area has few native trees, with extensive presence of non-native grasses in the understory, which raise fire risk. A stairwell leads to improvised trails.

Debs Park is a regional park operated and managed by the City of Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks. This hilly, 282-acre natural wilderness expanse remains mostly in a natural state with trails that weave throughout the site. The few improved picnic areas are popular sites for those holding family outings and community events. Vegetation at the park includes native California Walnut (*Juglans californica*) and California oak woodlands habitats that provide native and migratory birds some of the last natural arroyo woodlands existent in Southern California. The park is also home to vast expanses of non-native trees such as eucalyptus, pine, and tree of heaven. Large expanses of the south and southwestern region of the park, which includes the project area, remain barren and overrun with non-native grasses, and are therefore denuded and prone to fire and erosion. Due to the continued drought situation and greater number of heat days, vegetation at the park is showing signs of stress. Non-native trees and vegetation are exhibiting greater distress with signs of disease, and in many cases, the trees and plants are dying.

**Project History:** The Urban Forestry and Habitat Restoration at Debs Park project was submitted to the Conservancy by North East Trees as part of the Conservancy’s Proposition 1 Round 4 solicitation in spring of 2016.

**PROJECT FINANCING**

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b>	\$300,000
Ongoing Foundation support	\$40,000
<b>Project Total</b>	<b>\$340,000</b>

The expected source of funding for this authorization is the fiscal year 2016/17 appropriation to the Conservancy from the “Water Quality, Supply, and Infrastructure Improvement Act of 2014” (Proposition 1, Division 26.7 of the Water Code § 79700 et seq.). Funds appropriated to the Conservancy derive from Chapter 6 (commencing with Section 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). Section 79732(a) identifies the specific purposes of Chapter 6, of which the following pertain to this project: implement watershed adaptation projects in order to reduce the impacts of climate change on California’s communities and ecosystems (subsection (a)(2)); protect and restore coastal watersheds (subsection (a)(10)); and reduce pollution or contamination of rivers and streams, and protect or restore natural system functions that contribute to water supply, water quality, or flood management (subsection (a)(11)).

The proposed project was selected through the fourth-round competitive grant process under the Conservancy’s *Proposition 1 Grant Program Guidelines* adopted in June 2015 (see § 79706(a)). The proposed project meets each of the evaluation criteria in the Proposition 1 Guidelines as described in further detail in this “Project Financing” section, the “Project Summary” section and in the “Consistency with Conservancy’s Project Selection Criteria & Guidelines” section of this report.

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

The proposed project would be undertaken pursuant to Section 31113 of Chapter 3 of the of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding impacts of climate change, and pursuant to Chapter 5.5 of Division 21 (Section 31220), regarding coastal and marine resource protection.

Section 31113 authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to public agencies and nonprofit organizations for projects to address the potential impacts of climate change. Pursuant to this authorization, the Conservancy may provide grants for projects that reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Consistent with this section, the proposed project will assist in “reducing greenhouse gas emissions” by implementing an urban greening project that will contribute to carbon sequestration.

Section 31220(a) permits the Conservancy to provide grants for coastal watershed and coastal water quality projects, provided that such projects meet one or more of the objectives detailed in 31220(b). Subsections (1) and (7) of Section 31220(b) specifically authorize projects that reduce contamination of waters within the coastal zone and that reduce the impact of population and economic pressures on coastal and marine resources. The proposed project will improve habitat and water quality in the upper L.A. River watershed, thereby improving water quality of coastal waters and reducing the impacts of dense population along the Los Angeles coast.

As also required by Section 31220(a), Conservancy staff has consulted with the State Water Resources Control Board in the development of the project or grant to ensure consistency with Chapter 3 (commencing with Section 30915) of Division 20.4 of the Public Resources Code. In addition, consistent with Section 31220(c) the plan produced under the proposed project will include a monitoring and evaluation component and is consistent with regional, local or State

watershed management and water quality plans or programs, 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 5, Objective 5D** of the Conservancy’s 2013-2018 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will enhance the Los Angeles River watershed.

Consistent with **Goal 5, Objective 5G** of the Conservancy’s 2013-2018 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will improve water quality to benefit coastal and ocean resources.

**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:**
  - a. *California @ 50 Million: The Environmental Goals and Policy Report* (Governor’s Office of Planning and Research, 2013 Draft). The proposed project will promote the following goals: *Preserve and Steward State Lands and Natural Resources - 3. Build resilience in natural systems*. The proposed project will build resilience by restoring native habitat which will provide important carbon sequestration capacity while also providing the state’s native resident and migratory species necessary habitat.
  - b. *CA Climate Adaptation Strategy: Safeguarding California* (California Department of Fish and Wildlife, 2010). The proposed project will serve to implement priority actions of this Strategy under the heading “Biodiversity and Habitat; Energy; Public Health and Water”, since it will assist in: improving habitat connectivity; supporting environmental stewardship across sectors by promoting nature-based solutions for adapting to climate risks; and create and maintain partnerships that support biodiversity conservation and promote public education and outreach.
  - c. *Ernest E. Debs Regional Park Framework Plan* (City of Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks, 2000) The proposed project will directly implement several stated goals of the plan including (i) *Giving park visitors an urban wilderness experience by enhancing and restoring natural communities such as walnut*

*woodland, coastal sage scrub, and grasslands. (ii) Creating a safe and harmonious environment for all park visitors. (iii) Providing for the educational and recreational needs of the community while protecting wildlife habitat by encouraging appropriate activities in undeveloped areas of the park. (iv) Fostering positive recreational opportunities that will discourage and eliminate destructive park activities. (v) Encouraging, expanding and actively seeking community involvement in the development and implementation of park programs to promote community ties, personal ownership, and stewardship.*

**4. Support of the public:**

This project is supported by the Office of City Council District 1 of the City of Los Angeles, the Office of Supervisorial District 1 for the County of Los Angeles, the City of Los Angeles Department of Recreation and Parks, the Ernest E. Debs Park Advisory Board, the Arroyo Seco Foundation (ASF), the Friends of the Los Angeles River (FoLAR), the Highland Park Neighborhood Council, Audubon Center at Debs Park, and the Arroyo Seco Neighborhood Council.

5. **Location:** The project is located within Ernest E. Debs Regional Park in the city of Los Angeles and will improve water quality in the Los Angeles River system.
6. **Need:** Without Conservancy funding, the project would be indefinitely delayed until alternative funding could be identified.
7. **Greater-than-local interest:** Debs Park provides critical regional habitat connectivity and public access for disadvantaged communities. It is a regional destination for birdwatching, outdoor education and hiking.
8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** At an elevation of more than 600', the project is not vulnerable to sea-level rise.

**Additional Criteria**

9. **Resolution of more than one issue:** Implementation of the Project will reduce fire risk, improve habitat, reduce runoff, mitigate for the urban heat-island effect, and create valuable habitat.
10. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
11. **Readiness:** North East Trees is prepared to begin the project in June of 2017.
12. **Return to Conservancy:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
13. **Cooperation:** North East Trees will collaborate with the City of Los Angeles and local at-risk youth on the implementation of the project.
14. **Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** The project is designed to reduce the vulnerability of the project site to climate change. Restoration to native, drought tolerant plants will reduce fire risk, sequester carbon, and reduce maintenance and water needs.
15. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** The project is designed to create a net greenhouse gas emission benefit. The project will prioritize manual work and limit

construction machinery. The benefit associated with the habitat restoration will be greater than the greenhouse gas emissions associated with implementation.

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

The Integrated Regional Water Management Upper Los Angeles River Sub-regional Plan (IRWMP) applies to the project site. The project meets three of the five objectives of the IRWMP: 1) improving water quality; 2) enhancing habitat; and 3) enhancing open space and recreation. The project also benefits a fourth objective, improving water supply, through the utilization of native and drought tolerant plant materials. The proposed project will promote the goals of the IRWMP by assisting in creating a more efficient use of stormwater, protecting and improving water quality, and promoting environmental stewardship.

**COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:**

The proposed project is categorically exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15333, which exempts habitat restoration projects that: (a) do not exceed five acres in size, (b) do not create a significant adverse impact on endangered, rare or threatened species or their habitat pursuant to section 15065, (c) are not located where there are hazardous materials that may be disturbed or removed, and (d) will not result in impacts that are significant when viewed in connection with the effects of past projects, the effects of other current projects, and the effects of probable future projects. The proposed project will restore habitat for plants and wildlife in Debs Park through removal of invasive plants and planting of native plants. The project meets each of the criteria of Section 15333. Accordingly, the project is exempt from CEQA. Upon approval, staff will file a Notice of Exemption for this project.