

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

March 22, 2018

LEE ROAD TRAIL CONNECTOR

Project No. 17-045-01

Project Manager: Tom Gandesbery

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$330,000 to the City of Watsonville to prepare plans, designs, environmental analyses, and permit applications for a 1.4-mile long pedestrian and non-motorized vehicle trail parallel to Lee Road, including a bridge across Struve Slough.

LOCATION: City of Watsonville, Santa Cruz County (Exhibit 1).

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Public Access

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location and Regional Trail Maps](#)

Exhibit 2: [Preliminary Alignment and Photographs](#)

Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)

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 up to three hundred and thirty thousand dollars (\$330,000) to the City of Watsonville to prepare plans, designs, environmental analyses, and permit applications for 1.4 miles of new trail near Lee Road and Struve Slough in Watsonville, Santa Cruz County, subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to commencement of the project, the City of Watsonville shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer a work plan, schedule, budget, and the names of any contractors to be retained for implementation of the project.
2. The City shall ensure that the trail design is consistent with the Conservancy’s “Standards and Recommendations for Accessway Location and Development” and with all applicable federal and state statutes, regulations, and guidelines governing access for persons with disabilities.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

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“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, regarding a system of public accessways.
 2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
 3. The proposed project serves greater than local needs.”
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PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize disbursement of up to three hundred thirty thousand dollars (\$330,000) to the City of Watsonville (“City”) to prepare plans, designs, environmental analyses, and permit applications for the Lee Road Connector Trail, a 1.4-mile bicycle and pedestrian trail planned for the west side of the City of Watsonville (Exhibit 1). The Lee Road Connector Trail will be part The Watsonville Area Scenic Trails Network, a trail system that currently offers approximately 10-miles of bicycle and pedestrian trails that follow the Watsonville Sloughs (see Site Description, below). In 2012, the City of Watsonville adopted an Urban Greening Plan that includes extending the existing trails into a 33-mile regional trail network. The southern terminus of the Lee Road Connector Trail will connect to a planned trail along the Santa Cruz Branch Line railroad tracks, known as the Rail Trail, which, in this area, will run northwest to a junction with the Monterey Bay National Sanctuary Scenic Trail (MBNSST), at which point the Rail Trail will head north along the coast and form part of the MBNSST. The entire MBNSST will be the California Coastal Trail (CCT) along Monterey Bay. (Exhibit 1)

From its southern end at the future Rail Trail, the Lee Road Connector Trail will head north along Lee Road, first crossing a narrow reach of Watsonville Slough, then crossing Struve Slough and then following alongside of Struve Slough to reach Pajaro Valley High School (Exhibit 2, Figure 1). Historically, Lee Road bisected Struve Slough to connect properties on either side; however, this portion of the road was abandoned by the City and County several years ago after seasonal pumping of the slough ceased and Lee Road remained flooded year-round. The proposed project includes an 800 linear foot bicycle and pedestrian bridge over Struve Slough. The proposed project also includes upgrading the crossing over Watsonville Slough, where an existing culvert constrains the slough, to accommodate improved wetland function.

In addition to connecting to the Rail Trail, which will lead to the CCT, the proposed trail will provide a safe route to Pajaro Valley High School for students walking or biking from north of Highway 101. Approximately 25% of students attending the high school are within close proximity (less than 1.25 miles) to the proposed Lee Road Connector Trail. The trail will also pass directly adjacent to Watsonville Slough Farm, where the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County plans to construct up to 5 miles of trails around the portions of the Watsonville Sloughs within the farm. The Conservancy played a significant role in the protection of this 490-acre farm.

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The proposed trail will reduce greenhouse gas emissions by reducing the number of vehicle miles traveled. The Lee Road Connector Trail is a part of the City's effort to conduct climate-smart planning and facility development, as identified in the recently adopted Watsonville Climate Action Plan (2015).

The proposed project consists of planning and design of this critical segment of the network, which will then be eligible for implementation funding through state and regional transit programs. The project includes preparation of surveys, designs, engineering drawings and specifications for the new trail, as well as preparation of environmental analyses required under the California Environmental Quality Act, and permit applications.

The trail alignment falls within both the City and County's jurisdictional area. The City will enter into a Memorandum of Understanding or similar agreement with the County to implement the project.

The City is well qualified to undertake this project, and has a long history of successfully completing public access and land conservation projects throughout its jurisdiction including millions of dollars in Urban Greening and alternative transportation grants used to plan, design and construct the City's pedestrian and bicycle trail network.

Site Description: The Watsonville Sloughs is recognized as the largest and most significant wetland habitat between Pescadero Marsh and Elkhorn Slough, and is comprised of freshwater wetlands, riparian habitats, and upland grasslands. The Watsonville Sloughs includes five slough "arms": Gallighan, Harkins, Watsonville, West Struve, and Struve. The Watsonville Sloughs is the largest remaining distribution of freshwater wetlands in the central coast, and provides critical habitat for the region's coastal and migratory waterfowl, as well as a host of aquatic and riparian species such as the federally listed California red-legged frog (Exhibit 1).

The Lee Road Connector Trail will be a segment of the Watsonville Area Scenic Trails Network, a trail system that currently offers approximately 9-miles of bicycle and pedestrian trails that follow the Watsonville Sloughs (Exhibit 1). The trail segment will run roughly parallel to State Route 1 which is located less than one quarter mile east. East of Highway 1 is the City of Watsonville. Agriculture dominates the land use south of the trail and is largely row-crop farms. North and west of the trail is a mix of agriculture and wetlands. The trail will run along the west side of Struve Slough adjacent to the Struve Slough Ecological Reserve owned by the California Department of Fish and Wildlife. To the west, it passes the Watsonville Slough Farm, owned by the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County. The northern terminus of the trail at Pajaro Valley High School is on the western boundary of the City, where trail users will access existing bicycle lanes and sidewalks to return to the Watsonville Sloughs trail system at the Westridge business park (Exhibit 1).

Project History: The proposed project is an outgrowth of a planning process that was begun in the 1990s. Watsonville has experienced tremendous growth pressures, yet the City and County have sought to preserve remaining open space for farming and ecological resources. In the 1990s, the City proposed to annex land outside of its city limit, including the area west of Struve Slough where Pajaro Valley High School is now located. This brought about a focus on land use in the vicinity of Lee Road and the (then) new Pajaro Valley High School.

The City approached Conservancy staff about the project a few years ago. The City was not ready to move forward with the project until recently.

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PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$330,000
City of Watsonville	\$165,000
Project Total	\$495,000

The anticipated source for the Conservancy funds is an appropriation from the Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006, Public Resources Code Section 75001 et seq. (Proposition 84). Proposition 84 authorizes the Conservancy’s use of these funds to promote access to and enjoyment of coastal resources through projects undertaken pursuant to the Conservancy’s enabling legislation (Division 21 of the Public Resources Code).

Public Resources Code § 75060(e) allocates funds to the Conservancy for the protection of Monterey Bay and its watersheds. “Protection,” as defined in Public Resources Code § 75005(m), includes “actions necessary to allow the continued use and enjoyment of property or natural resources and includes acquisition, development, restoration, preservation and interpretation,” as defined. “Development” is defined in Public Resources Code § 75005(f) to include physical improvement of real property.

Consistent with these provisions, the proposed project will promote access to and enjoyment of the Watsonville Sloughs, which is within the Monterey Bay watershed, by development of a new section of trail crossing Struve Slough, and will serve as a connection to the California Coastal Trail via the Rail Trail (Exhibit 2). The proposed project will also protect the natural resources of the Watsonville Sloughs by upgrading the culvert across Watsonville Slough that currently constrains wetland function. The proposed project is consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, as described in the “Consistency with Conservancy’s enabling legislation” section below. Accordingly, the proposed project is consistent with the funding requirements of Proposition 84 funds.

The City will provide a total of \$165,000 toward this phase of the project, including a \$120,000 from Measure D, a voter approved sales tax implemented in Santa Cruz County to fund transportation projects, as well as \$45,000 of in-kind staff support.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project will be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31400 et seq.) regarding public access to and enjoyment of the coast. 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. Through the proposed action, the Conservancy will play a primary role by funding the planning of the proposed trail segment through a portion of the Watsonville Sloughs that will lead to the CCT by connecting to the regional Rail Trail.

Section 31400.2 requires the Conservancy to consider a number of factors in determining the amount of funding for an access project. Consistent with this section, the proposed level of

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funding was evaluated relative to the total amount of funding available to the Conservancy for coastal access projects, the fiscal resources of the applicant, and the Conservancy's project selection criteria (see Consistency with Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria & Guidelines). The City of Watsonville has committed to provide funds and staff time to this project; however, the City does not have sufficient funds available for recreational trails to complete the project without assistance.

Section 31409 authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to a public entity to establish and expand those inland trail systems that may be linked to the California Coastal Trail (CCT). The proposed project will design a trail that is part of an inland trail system that connects to the CCT. As indicated in Exhibit 1, the southern terminus of the Lee Road Connector Trail will connect to a future segment of the regional Rail Trail paralleling the current Santa Cruz Branch Line railroad tracks, which will run northwest (perpendicular to the coast) to a junction with the CCT/MBNSST.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ACCESS PROGRAM STANDARDS:

Standard No. 1, Protect Public and Coastal Resources: The project will seek to carefully design the trail to minimize the alteration of natural landforms, protect the public, and protect environmentally sensitive habitats.

Standard No. 3, Access Easements: Construction and Location: Trail width and locations will be selected to minimize their width.

Standard No. 5, Environmentally Sensitive Areas: The project area includes sensitive wetlands and two slough crossings. The trail will be cited to avoid environmentally sensitive areas, to the extent feasible, and the slough crossings will be designed to minimize impacts to wetlands and aquatic habitat.

Standard No. 13 Barrier-Free Access: The trail will be designed to comply with ADA guidelines as feasible and will be designed to be accessible to wheelchair users.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S 2018-2022 STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective E** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will design a new 1.4 mile section of the regional Watsonville Area Scenic Trails Network, which will connect to the Santa Cruz Rail Trail and then to the California Coastal Trail, thereby connecting inland populations to the coast.

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:** By developing public access and Coastal Trail facilities the project serves to promote and implement state Coastal Act policies as follows:
 - ***Coastal Act (1976)*** – Public Resources Code Section 30210 on public access and recreation calls for “maximum access, which shall be conspicuously posted, and recreational opportunities shall be provided for all the people consistent with public safety needs and the need to protect public rights, rights of private property owners, and natural resource areas from overuse,” and Section 30214 calls for public access and recreation that “takes into account the need to regulate the time, place, and manner of public access depending on the facts and circumstances in each case. . . .”. Section 30240 on environmentally sensitive habitat areas states that “environmentally sensitive habitat areas shall be protected against any significant disruption of habitat values, and only uses dependent on those resources shall be allowed within those areas,” and “... shall be sited and designed to prevent impacts which would significantly degrade those areas...” The proposed project will develop a trail design consistent with these sections.
 - ***California @ 50 Million (2015)*** – The proposed project will further the objectives of the *California @ 50 Million Environmental Goals and Policy Report*. The report identifies active transportation projects as a top priority for future transportation investment. The report also identifies walking and biking as key “opportunities” to achieve its goals. The proposed project will provide a safe walking and biking connection from downtown Watsonville to Pajaro Valley High School and to future trails on the Watsonville Slough Farm property. It will also connect to the regional Rail Trail.
4. **Support of the public:** The Conservancy has received letters of support from State Senator Bill Monning, and Assemblymembers Anna Caballero and Mark Stone. The project is also supported by the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County and Watsonville Wetlands Watch. See Exhibit 3: Project Letters.
5. **Location:** The proposed project is located within the coastal zone of Santa Cruz County.
6. **Need:** The City of Watsonville is providing significant match funds, but without additional funding from the Conservancy the project will not take place.
7. **Greater-than-local interest:** The project will result in a design of a 1.4-mile-long spur trail that is planned to connect to California Coastal Trail. The Watsonville Sloughs system is a significant natural resource area and includes a designed state wildlife area.
8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The proposed project is located on properties that are 20-30 feet in elevation, and therefore not subject to flooding associated with sea level rise within the

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next 100 years; however, the bridge may be built at a lower elevation than the rest of the trail and will be designed to avoid these sea level rise effects.

Additional Criteria

9. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
10. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The proposed project will provide the general public a way to view and enjoy the Watsonville Sloughs while also providing a safe route for students attending Pajaro Valley High School.
11. **Readiness:** The City of Watsonville has allocated staff to support this project and anticipates funding from local transportation program administered by the Regional Transportation Commission. The City has a proven track record of successfully completing trail planning and construction projects.
12. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** The Coastal Conservancy invested over \$9.6 million to conservation of the Watsonville Sloughs complex. In 1999 provide a grant to the County of Santa Cruz to develop the Watsonville Slough Enhancement Plan. The enhancement plan identified a number of high priority actions including to develop “access improvements to enable a greater public awareness of the values of the Watsonville Sloughs for native wildlife and natural resources as well as their economic, social and recreational values. In 2002 the Conservancy granted \$3 million to the City of Watsonville to acquire approximately 80 acres of grassland, riparian, wetland, and agricultural land surrounding Pajaro Valley High School. A primary objective of the acquisition was to fortify the urban/rural boundary in order to help protect hundreds of acres of wetlands and high value farmland. From 2009-2011, the Conservancy provided \$6.5 million to the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County for acquisition of four properties totaling 490 acres of farmland, known collectively as the “Watsonville Sloughs Farm” for wetlands protection and agricultural preservation, The grant also funded initial restoration planning. The Land Trust manages the land using sustainable farming practices and is planning to offer formal access to trails within the farm. The proposed trail segment will provide a safe connection for bikes and pedestrians to the western section of the slough complex providing access to planned trails on Watsonville Slough Farm and the wetlands surrounding Pajaro Valley High School.
13. **Cooperation:** The City of Watsonville has partnered with Watsonville Wetlands Watch (WWW) and the Land Trust of Santa Cruz County on this project. WWW will assist the City in the planning and development of the project. In addition, landscape maintenance and habitat restoration along the trail may be implemented by students and community volunteers under the guidance of WWW. The proposed will trail will further the goals of the Land Trust in greatly improving connectivity between the Watsonville Slough Farms and the planned trails for that property with the City’s trail network.
14. **Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** The proposed trail is not vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The proposed project to design the Lee Road Connector Trail within the Watsonville Sloughs

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region, consisting of planning and design of the pedestrian and bicycle trail and bridge, along with preparation of environmental analyses and permit applications, is statutorily exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) under 14 Cal. Code of Regs. Section 15262, as it involves preparation of plans and designs for future actions which have not yet been approved or funded, and for which the planning will consider environmental factors. The proposed project is also categorically exempt from CEQA pursuant to 14 Cal. Code of Regs. Section 15306 to the extent it includes basic data collection and resource evaluation activities that will not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource. Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon approval of the project.