

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
May 24, 2018

FITCH MOUNTAIN PUBLIC ACCESS IMPROVEMENTS

Project No. 13-002-02
Project Manager: Michael Bowen

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$150,000 to the City of Healdsburg to construct public access improvements at Fitch Mountain, Sonoma County, and adoption of findings pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act.

LOCATION: Fitch Mountain, Healdsburg, Sonoma County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: San Francisco Bay Conservancy Program

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location and Site Map](#)
- Exhibit 2: [Fitch Mountain Park and Open Space Preserve Management Plan](#)
- Exhibit 3: [Final Mitigated Negative Declaration](#)
- Exhibit 4: [Project Letters](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31160 et seq. of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of up to one hundred fifty thousand dollars (\$150,000) to the City of Healdsburg to construct public access improvements described in the Fitch Mountain Park and Open Space Preserve Management Plan, in Healdsburg, Sonoma County, subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of funds, the City of Healdsburg shall submit for review and approval by the Executive Officer of the Conservancy:
 - a. A work program including a schedule and budget for the project.
 - b. The names and qualifications of all contractors to be retained for the project.
2. The City of Healdsburg shall ensure that the project is consistent 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:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed project is consistent with the current Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
2. The proposed authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program.
3. The Conservancy independently reviewed and considered the *Fitch Mountain Park and Open Space Preserve Management Plan Final Mitigated Negative Declaration* (MND) adopted by the City of Healdsburg on November 20, 2017, pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act, and attached to the accompanying staff recommendation as Exhibit 3, public comment to the MND, and the Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Program. The Conservancy finds that the project as designed and mitigated avoids, reduces or mitigates the potentially significant environmental effects to a less-than-significant level, and that there is no substantial evidence based on the record as a whole that the project may have a significant effect on the environment, as defined in 14 Cal. Code Regulations Section 15382.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize the disbursement of up to \$150,000 to the City of Healdsburg (“City”) to implement Phase A of the Fitch Mountain Park and Open Space Preserve Management Plan (“Plan”) for Fitch Mountain in Healdsburg, Sonoma County (Exhibit 1). The City of Healdsburg recently acquired, via a phased acquisition, fee title to approximately 170-acres of Fitch Mountain. The Plan (Exhibit 2) outlines measures in two phases that the City intends to pursue in order to enhance public enjoyment of the Fitch Mountain Park and Open Space Preserve (“the Preserve”). The City intends to implement Phase A of the Plan in 2018-2019, including construction of the following components:

- Parking Lot Improvements
- Trailhead and picnic area with benches and picnic tables
- Connector trail with wooden footbridge to access the Preserve
- Erosion Control
- Drainage Enhancements
- Improvements at Pedestrian and Emergency Vehicle Access Points
- ADA restrooms (Temporary Portable Facility)

Phase B of the Plan, not yet funded or scheduled for construction includes the following components:

- ADA Compliant Restroom (Permanent)
- ADA Compliant Walkway connecting the Preserve to Dog Park and Playground

- Dog Park Improvements
- Low Gradient Trail (Banana Slug Trail)
- Connector Trail to Riverview Site

To ensure that public access occurs in a way that protects and enhances the natural resources at the site, the City's Plan, funded with an earlier Conservancy grant, provides criteria for the operations, maintenance, and management of the 170-acre property ("the Property"), as well as how the Property will be served by existing or modified parking, staging, picnicking and restroom facilities at the Villa Chanticleer, a City park and entertainment facility located at the base of the mountain. The Villa Chanticleer now serves as an informal staging ground to the top of Fitch Mountain. The Plan will help the City to formalize and improve upon the existing arrangement. Preserve visitors will be redirected from using an informal network of trails to use of formal trails throughout the "park improvement area," a series of locations outlined in the conservation easement for the Property.

The Plan recommends access improvements and a formal Preserve entrance for Fitch Mountain at the Villa Chanticleer's lower parking lot as it represents the only feasible location where a formal trailhead with vehicular access to the Preserve can be developed around the mountain.

Site Description: Fitch Mountain is one of the most prominent physical landmarks found in northern Sonoma County. The mountain lies in an unincorporated area, surrounded by the City of Healdsburg and provides a scenic backdrop for the City and other communities along the Russian River. The heavily wooded mountain can be seen from a great distance in all directions, and it can be readily accessed from Highway 101 and downtown Healdsburg.

The Property, recently acquired by the City, features oak and madrone woodlands, mixed conifer forest, coast redwoods, an intermittent creek and the mountain's 991-foot peak. The Property can be accessed from Hilltop Road and Woods Road in Healdsburg, and there are three miles of unimproved dirt roads on the Property. There are no structures on the site, although it surrounds two water tanks owned by the City. The site has been used historically and unofficially by recreational hikers and other users. Other surrounding land uses include residences on the south, east, and north, with the Villa Chanticleer, a popular Healdsburg city park, wedding facility and conference center on the west of the Property.

Grantee Qualifications: The City of Healdsburg is eminently qualified to advance the project. The City has a fulltime Parks and Recreation Department that oversees and administers all parks within the City's domain. City staff successfully managed the prior Conservancy grant for the access plan and exhibited administrative competence throughout the process. As property owner and grantee for the Plan, the City is the appropriate party to initiate and implement the long-term management and public access needs of the Property described in the Plan. The City also possesses the adequate staff resources to solicit additional funds from outside funding sources and to manage the improved property through their Parks Department.

Project History: The property was purchased in 2014 by the Sonoma County Agricultural Preservation and Open Space District (District) and transferred from the previous owner directly to the City of Healdsburg (City). The City in turn transferred it temporarily to the non-profit

organization LandPaths to manage on behalf of the City during an interim period. Title to the Preserve reverted back to the City in November 2017. During this interim period and with funding obtained from the Coastal Conservancy, the City retained Prunuske Chatham, Inc. (PCI) to develop a long-term management plan (Plan) for the property. That effort culminated in the Fitch Mountain Park and Open Space Preserve Management Plan, approved November 20, 2017. As described in Project Summary, above, the Plan outlined two phases of work to improve access to Fitch Mountain. These primarily focused on parking, trailhead and restroom facilities. The City contacted the Conservancy in Fall of 2017 to discuss funding opportunities, and submitted a grant application in March 2018 to request funding for implementation of the first phase of access improvements.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	150,000.00
City of Healdsburg	480,000.00
Total Project Costs	630,000.00

The anticipated source of the Conservancy's funds will be the fiscal year 2016/2017 appropriation from 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.). The project is appropriate for funding under this source as these funds are available for “projects ... to promote access to and enjoyment of the coastal resources of the state.” Public Resources Code section 75060. These funds are also available for expenditure in accordance with the Conservancy’s enabling legislation (Division 21 of the Public Resources Code) and with San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program pursuant to Chapter 4.5 of Division 21.

The proposed project will help develop ecologically appropriate public access improvements. The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, as discussed in the “Consistency with Conservancy’s enabling legislation” section of this report, below.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project is consistent with Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, Sections 31160-31165.

Consistent with section 31162(a) the Conservancy may undertake projects and award grants in the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area that will help achieve the goals of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program, including improving public access to and around the bay, coast, ridgetops and open spaces. Sonoma County is one of the nine Bay Area counties, and the proposed project will serve visitors from the greater Bay Area, and many from nearby urban areas such as Santa Rosa. Consistent with Section 31162(d) the project will help provide accessible open space and natural areas to urban populations for recreational purposes.

Consistent with Section 31163 the Conservancy has cooperated with the City to identify and adopt long-term resource and outdoor recreational goals for the San Francisco Bay Area at Fitch Mountain. Consistent with Section 31163(c), the project (1) is supported by the City’s General Plan which designates Fitch Mountain as Open Space and as a Major Scenic Ridgeline; (2)

serves a multijurisdictional constituency; (3) will be timely implemented; (4) provides opportunities surely lost should the property be kept closed to the public, and; (5) ensures significant matching funds such as those provided for the acquisition and management by the District and City, as well as \$480,000 in City funds for Project Phase A implementation.

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

Consistent with **Goal 13 Objective B**, this project will implement a project that provides recreational facilities such as picnic and staging areas, parking lots, and natural play spaces.

Consistent with **Goal 13 Objective I**, this project will implement a plan for a regionally significant public access trail and a community connector between Healdsburg and the iconic Fitch Mountain.

**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. **Promotion and implementation of state plans and policies:**

The California Recreational Trails Plan crafted by the California Department of Parks and Recreation was first released in 1978, then updated in 2002. That plan seeks to "(p)romote the establishment and maintenance of a system of trails and greenways that serves California's diverse population while respecting and protecting the integrity of its equally diverse natural and cultural resources...." One of its primary goals is to "(p)rovide grant programs or other funding to encourage development of local trail system plans. Another is to provide "barrier-free or fully accessible trails that offer a variety of features and experiences." The Fitch Mountain improvements proposed for funding fit clearly into the broad vision and goals of this statewide plan.

By enhancing public access the proposed project advances the goals of California @ 50 Million: The Environmental Goals and Policy Report (Governor's Office of Planning and Research, 2013 Draft) Chapter 4 – Goals for California's Future, which states that "investments in . . . safe, walkable communities are needed to provide viable alternatives to driving" in order to reduce greenhouse gas emissions (page 15). Although the project will not reduce greenhouse gas emissions related to commuting, it will provide a local venue for safe walks within the community.

3. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the "Project Financing" section above.

4. **Support of the public:** The Fitch Mountain Trail has broad community support. There is strong support from the Sonoma County Board of Supervisors who voted unanimously in favor of purchasing the Property for public access and support from Healdsburg City Council who also voted unanimously in favor of accepting the Property with the purpose of opening it for public access. In addition, LandPaths supported the project by serving as an interim owner and manager of the Property for the initial three years while the Property was prepared for public access and then transferred back to the City. The Fitch Mountain Fund has been established so that the public can donate money to help offset any unexpected expenditure or fund any newly proposed capital projects for public access purposes. To date the fund has commitments of over \$100,000 with a goal of raising \$200,000. Letters of support are attached as Exhibit 4.
5. **Location:** The proposed project is located in an unincorporated portion of the county, but within the City's sphere of influence, immediately east of the City of Healdsburg's downtown in Sonoma County.
6. **Need:** Little public access to open space exists in Sonoma County immediately adjacent to the Highway 101 corridor and along the Russian River. This project offers an opportunity to serve both those who reside in or visit the Healdsburg area, as well as those who are simply passing through and seek an opportunity to enjoy a short hike and sweeping vistas of the Russian River and surrounding valleys. It is also an excellent opportunity to cooperate with the City and LandPaths in developing means to introduce currently underserved residents to new recreational opportunities in Sonoma County. Given the changing demographics of Healdsburg and the surrounding areas, a growing number of underserved residents do not currently participate in wilderness park experiences, a trend that this project seeks to reverse. The new facilities will enhance public access opportunities for traditionally underserved sectors of the public, as well as local residents and visitors who currently enjoy the site.
7. **Greater-than-local interest:** Healdsburg is an internationally recognized destination, and its proximity to Highway 101 affords an excellent opportunity to provide many different constituencies with a great and distinctly Sonoma County outdoor experience.
8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The project is significantly inland and at a high elevation so there is no sea level rise vulnerability.

Additional Criteria

9. **Resolution of more than one issue:** Despite longstanding development pressure, the City has recognized Fitch Mountain's importance by designating it as Open Space and as a Major Scenic Ridgeline in the City's General Plan. The proposed project will ensure that the natural resources of the mountain are protected and enhanced while affording a significant increase in public access opportunity in and around the City of Healdsburg.
10. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
11. **Readiness:** Having successfully completed the Fitch Mountain Management Plan, the major partners are anxious to open the area officially and responsibly. The planning process is complete, and the City is ready to implement the project.
12. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** The proposed project will help the Conservancy and its partners realize their long-term goal of providing significant and well-spaced public

access opportunities along the Russian River corridor. This effort is consistent with similar Conservancy access projects along the Russian River ranging from Cloverdale to Jenner.

13. **Minimization of Greenhouse Gas Emissions:** The CEQA analysis concluded that emissions from construction, maintenance, and vehicle traffic constitute little change from existing conditions at the City park and within the Open Space Preserve since park infrastructure, trails, and visitor use exists today. The City would install bathrooms that use solar power, so the project would create no new energy demand or otherwise conflict with promoting energy conservation. The project improves bicycle and pedestrian transit in the residential neighborhood by providing bike racks and creating safer pedestrian park access. The project would use the existing parking lot and does not include any expansion or new spaces, so it does not change the existing condition. One mitigation measure identified in the CEQA document calls for the City to explore the potential to add electric vehicle charging stations in the lower parking lot to help the City comply with regional goals to attain the goal of 1 million zero-emission and near-zero-emission vehicles by 2020. The project includes project measures that require revegetation of all disturbed areas which will increase vegetation and will increase potential sequestration.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

Pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), the City of Healdsburg prepared the *Fitch Mountain Park and Open Space Preserve Management Plan Initial Study/Proposed MND*. The City adopted the Final MND at its November 20, 2017 meeting.

The MND identifies 16 separate mitigation measures in the areas of biological resources, cultural resources, greenhouse gases, hazards, noise and recreation that would avoid impacts, or reduce them below the level of significance, such that the project would not result in significant adverse impacts on the environment. A majority of the impacts are short-term and associated with the construction phase of the project. Potential project impacts and relevant mitigations include:

Biological Resources: The construction phase of the project could potentially have adverse effects on special status plants, birds, bats, terrestrial wildlife, or their habitats. To reduce potential impacts to less than significant levels, steps will be taken to minimize impacts to special status species by conducting pre-construction surveys for all special status species, by limiting work when possible to outside bird nesting season (Feb 15-Aug 31), by maintaining a separation of 100' from nests when construction does occur during nesting season, by conducting special bat surveys of any tree over 6" diameter prior to removal, and by avoiding on site and propagating off site for replanting the Napa false indigo plant.

Cultural Resources: There is some potential for construction activities to impact archeological resources and human remains. However, project activities are not expected to have a significant adverse effect because the following mitigation measures will be implemented: work will be stopped and inspected by a qualified archeologist if cultural resources are discovered during project activities; and human remains, if discovered, will be protected consistent with California State law. If cultural resources are discovered, activity shall cease, and the City shall contact and consult with local tribes who have a traditional and cultural affiliation with the project area, including Cloverdale Rancheria of Pomo Indians,

Dry Creek Rancheria of Pomo Indians, Lytton Rancheria of California, and Mishwal-Wappo Tribe of Alexander Valley.

Greenhouse Gas: The City shall identify potential locations for two or three electric vehicle charging stations. If good locations and suitable equipment are identified, the charging stations shall be incorporated into Phase 2 Improvements as funding allows.

Hazards: The MND identifies ten measures to reduce fire risk on the Preserve during maintenance activities, including, but not limited to the development of a Fire Risk Abatement Plan, prohibiting driving over flammable materials, conducting City staff patrols of the Preserve during periods of high fire danger days, carrying standard fire-fighting equipment on all vehicles driving onto the Preserve, and employing multiple best management practices, such as using spark arrestors on all equipment and vehicles to be used on the Preserve, limiting power tools during high fire danger periods, and so forth.

Noise: The City shall utilize quiet equipment, mufflers, prohibition of amplified music, notifications to residents and a “disturbance coordinator” tasked with handling complaints to mitigate any adverse impacts of noise on local receptors.

Recreation: The City shall ensure that approved, large special events at the Villa Chanticleer do not conflict with those at the Fitch Mountain Park and Open Space District by maintaining a joint calendar and encouraging alternative parking and carpooling.

In addition to mitigation measures, the MND identifies eleven “project measures” or environmental commitments that have been adopted to reduce or avoid adverse effects that could result from Project construction, maintenance, or operation. General environmental commitments include: avoidance of native plants and wildlife communities; erosion control; water quality protection and site maintenance activities; dust control during construction and management activities; revegetation after site disturbance; best management practices for hazardous materials handling and pollution prevention; invasive species management activities; pathogen management activities (sudden oak death, specifically); best management practices for pesticide or herbicide use; protection of dusky-footed wood rat nests; habitat protection measures during fire abatement and vegetation management activities; and limiting construction hours to Monday through Saturday 7:30 AM to 6:00 PM. The mitigation measures and the environmental commitments will be incorporated into construction documents prepared for the project and will thus be contractually required of all construction contractors.

Conservancy staff has reviewed the MND and concurs that no significant adverse impacts will result from the project.

Staff will file a Notice of Determination upon approval.