

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

March 14, 2019

BAY AREA RIDGE TRAIL MULTI-YEAR PLANNING

Project No.: 04-085-04

Project Manager: Brenda Buxton

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$750,000 to the Bay Area Ridge Trail Council for planning of future Bay Area Ridge Trail projects.

LOCATION: Various locations along the Bay Area Ridge Trail alignment within the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area (see Exhibit 1)

PROGRAM CATEGORY: San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Maps](#)

Exhibit 2: [June 2018 Briefing Book](#)

Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31111 and 31160-31165 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed seven hundred fifty thousand dollars (\$750,000) to the Bay Area Ridge Trail Council to conduct planning and feasibility studies, data collection and resource evaluation activities to support future development of new Bay Area Ridge Trail segments.

Prior to the disbursement of any Conservancy funds, the Bay Area Ridge Trail Council shall submit for review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy:

1. A detailed work program, schedule and budget.
2. The names and qualifications of any subcontractors that it intends to employ for this planning work.

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 the purposes and objectives of Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the recreational goals of the San Francisco Bay Area, including public access to, within and around the bay and ridgetops, and Pub. Res. Code 31111 regarding funding plans and feasibility studies to nonprofit organizations to further the purposes of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
3. The Bay Area Ridge Trail Council 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 California Public Resources Code.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends that the Conservancy authorize disbursement of up to \$750,000 to the Bay Area Ridge Trail Council (BARTC) to conduct planning and feasibility studies, data collection and resource evaluation activities to support future development and construction of, and acquisition of interests in real property for new Bay Area Ridge Trail segments.

The BARTC is working towards the goal of creating a 550-mile multi-use (serving hikers, mountain bicyclists and equestrians), continuous trail that rings San Francisco Bay high on the ridgeline. To date, over 375 miles of the Ridge Trail are open and dedicated for public use. The Ridge Trail serves all nine Bay Area counties and helps to create an interconnected system of open space and trails to provide recreation and scenic views to the public. The BARTC is effectively assisting the Conservancy in meeting its statutory and strategic goals of improving access around the San Francisco Bay Area ridgetops – during the estimated 2.5-year planning horizon of the proposed grant, the BARTC will be developing plans to greatly increase the miles of dedicated Ridge Trail.

Since its inception in 1987, the primary purpose of the BARTC, a 501(c)(3) non-profit organization, has been to plan, promote, acquire, build and maintain the Ridge Trail. The BARTC’s governing structure was designed to ensure an ongoing public-private partnership with public agencies and trail enthusiasts. The BARTC has a membership base of approximately 3,300 people and over 1,000 volunteer workers who regularly participate in its work. These aspects of the BARTC make it uniquely qualified to carry out activities necessary to develop or make accessible new segments of the Ridge Trail.

This authorization would advance planning for the future completion of 45 miles of Ridge Trail segments by continuing identification and refinement of the trail route, negotiating and developing agreements for the acquisition of property from willing sellers (including fee title and trail easements), designing and engineering trail segments, addressing needed Ridge Trail signage, and preparing and reviewing environmental review documents, maps and permit applications. Specifically, the proposed project seeks to open over 25 new miles of the primary trail alignment of the Ridge Trail (the main continuous trail encircling the Bay) by funding the BARTC’s technical support of the local cities, counties, nonprofit organizations, park and open space agencies that construct and manage the trail segments. In addition, the BARTC will

secure, plan and/or design up to 20 miles of new primary trail alignment. Furthermore, the project will support the planning for 10 to 15 miles of regionally-significant connector trails. (See Map 1 Potential Trail Openings, Exhibit 1).

A focus of this proposed project will be to plan for approximately five miles of Ridge Trail to specifically serve disadvantaged or severely disadvantaged communities, to participate with conservation and park organizations to integrate trail alignments with wildlife crossings to improve both wildlife connectivity and trail safety over obstacles such as highways and railroads (see Maps 2 Conservation Lands and Map 3 Trail and Wildlife Crossings, Exhibit 1), to fabricate and install wayfinding and identifications signs, and to close multi-use gaps in the trail so that all users (including cyclists or equestrians) are included. In addition, the Ridge Trail seeks to integrate its planning efforts with other regional and state trail planning organizations, such as the Bay Area Trails Collaborative, Great California Delta Trail, and Juan Bautista de Anza Trail, to ensure regional trail connectivity. Finally, the Ridge Trail will continue to promote long-distance/overnight trekking so that various trail group users (hiking, equestrian, biking) can undertake multi-day journeys.

Site Description: The proposed project will support development of a regional trail along the Bay Area Ridge Trail alignment, which includes ridgetops throughout the nine-county San Francisco Bay area (see Exhibit 1).

Project History: The vision for the Bay Area Ridge Trail is a 550-mile multi-use (serving hikers, mountain bicyclists and equestrians), continuous trail that rings San Francisco Bay high on the ridgeline. Under the leadership of the Conservancy and the BARTC, and supported by a diverse group of project participants, the Ridge Trail creates an interconnected system of open space and trails that provides recreational opportunities and scenic views to the public. Begun over 25 years ago, the BARTC has dedicated and opened over 375 miles of public trail in all nine Bay Area counties. (See Exhibit 2 for detailed information by county.)

This authorization will further the Conservancy's statutory and strategic goals of improving access around San Francisco Bay, and is consistent with previous Conservancy authorizations to the BARTC to negotiate and acquire trail easements, prepare trail construction plans and designs, and construct and open trail segments to the public. Specifically, in August 1998, following the first appropriation of funds for the San Francisco Bay Area Program, the Conservancy approved a grant of \$300,000 to the BARTC to prepare trail construction plans and negotiate trail easements to make eight specific Ridge Trail segments open to the public. In December 2000, the Conservancy approved a grant of \$3,427,800 to the BARTC, \$1,527,800 of which was used for planning and other work to support projects, and \$1,900,000 of which was authorized for construction and acquisition grants for individual projects. As a result of this 2000 grant, BARTC planned approximately 100 miles of trail along 60 segments, constructed 66 miles of trail as part of 14 projects, and secured 16.8 miles of the trail alignment.

In December 2004, the Conservancy approved a grant of \$1,200,000 to the BARTC to perform planning activities for future Ridge Trail projects. As a result of this 2004 grant, BARTC planned approximately 78 miles of trail along 70 segments; dedicated and opened 52 miles of trail along 13 segments; secured about 74 miles of the trail alignment; installed interpretive signs; and conducted database and mapping work. The Conservancy also awarded funds to Ridge Trail site managers for specific projects, authorizing a total of \$2,287,140 to design 23 miles of Ridge Trail and construct 11 miles.

In May 2010, the Conservancy approved a grant of \$1,200,000 to the BARTC for additional planning. As a result of this 2010 grant, BARTC dedicated 39 new miles along 19 segments, and proceeded to plan a variety of segments totaling over 100 miles, preparing another 40 miles of primary Ridge Trail and 12 connector miles for construction. During the period of this 2010 grant, the Conservancy also awarded 16 grants to Ridge Trail site managers for specific projects totaling \$2,418,150, plus grants for three larger-scale projects that involved the Ridge Trail, to design and construct approximately 16 and 23 miles of Ridge Trail, respectively.

In December 2015, the Conservancy awarded BARTC \$765,000 for additional planning activities. As a result of the 2015 grant, the Ridge Trail Council dedicated 19 miles including 15 new miles and 4 miles that were upgraded to full multi-use; and worked on active planning efforts for a wide variety of trails all across the region, totaling about 125 miles. Of these planning projects: about 32 miles (and an additional 12 miles of Ridge trail connector trails) were brought to “shovel ready” status. In addition, these efforts helped facilitate the Conservancy’s support of Ridge Trail planning and implementation projects during this period, including \$400,000 for closing a five-mile Bay Area Ridge Trail gap with the acquisition of 298 acres of the Suscol Headwaters Preserve, \$125,000 for planning and design of 1.5 miles of joint San Francisco Bay Trail/Bay Area Ridge Trail along the Carquinez Straits, and \$110,000 for construction of a 0.4-mile segment of the Bay Area Ridge Trail, which connected a public parking lot to the Milagra Ridge portion of Golden Gate National Recreation Area. Furthermore, the Conservancy awarded \$1 million for the development of long-awaited public access at Mount Umunhum, including 1.3 miles of Ridge Trail. At 3,486 feet, the Mount Umunhum Ridge Trail is the highest point on the existing Ridge Trail and offers spectacular views of the South Bay. The Vargas Plateau staging area (funded with \$200,000 from the Conservancy) was also completed during this time period, opening two miles of Ridge Trail and three miles of other trails to the public.

PROJECT FINANCING

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|------------------------------|--------------------|
| Coastal Conservancy | \$750,000 |
| Bay Area Ridge Trail Council | <u>\$390,000</u> |
| Total Project Cost | \$1,140,000 |

The anticipated source of Conservancy funds is the “California Drought, Water, Parks, Climate, Coastal Protection, and Outdoor Access for All Act of 2018” (Proposition 68). As required by Chapter 9 of Proposition 68, *Ocean, Bay, and Coastal Protection*, this project is consistent with the purposes of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program and will protect coastal watershed resources. (Pub. Res. Code section 80120(a)). As defined by Proposition 68, protection of coastal watershed resources includes actions, such as this project, that will improve access to public open-space areas to allow the continued use and enjoyment of property or natural, cultural, and historic resources. (Section 80002(1)). Funding under most of Proposition 68 requires 20% of funds available pursuant to that chapter go to serving disadvantaged communities (DACs). However, Chapter 9 requires that at least 15% of the total funds go to severely disadvantaged communities (SDACs), defined as a community with a median household income less than 60 percent of the statewide average. For this project, approximately \$75,000 will be used to support planning of trail segments that will be located in SDACs, which will assist the Conservancy in meeting the funding goal.

This project is further consistent with Proposition 68 because it will leverage funds from other sources. The BARTC anticipates matching Conservancy funds with \$53,500 secured from private foundations and the Santa Clara Valley Open Space Authority as well as an estimated \$261,500 from individual gifts. In addition, the BARTC estimates that, on an annual basis, 600 volunteers contribute many thousands of hours on trail stewardship as well as organizing and leading the public on guided trail outings and events.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

Pursuant to Section 31111 of the Public Resources Code, the Conservancy may fund and undertake plans and feasibility studies and may award grants to nonprofit organizations for these purposes. The proposed project consists of funds awarded to the BARTC, a nonprofit grantee, to undertake plans and feasibility studies for implementation of the Bay Area Ridge Trail.

Pursuant to Section 31162(a), the Conservancy may award grants in the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area that will help to improve public access to, within, and around the ridgetops, consistent with the rights of private property owners, and without having a significant adverse impact on agricultural operations and environmentally sensitive areas and wildlife. Consistent with Section 31162(a), the proposed project will enable the BARTC to plan for development and implementation of the Bay Area Ridge Trail, a regional ridgetop trail system located entirely within the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area. As required by Section 31162(a), the proposed project is consistent with the rights of private property owners because Ridge Trail segments are only built with the permission of property owners over which the trail is located. In addition, Ridge Trail projects will be designed to not have a significant impact on agricultural operations, environmentally sensitive areas, or wildlife. Any future trail development projects resulting from this proposed planning grant will require future environmental review.

Consistent with Section 31163(a), the Conservancy cooperates with nonprofit land trusts and other organizations such as the BARTC in identifying and adopting long-term resource and outdoor recreational goals for the San Francisco Bay Area. Completion of the Ridge Trail is identified in (1) *The San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program Regional Needs Briefing Book (BARTC, July 1999)* and (2) *400 Miles and Beyond: A Strategic Plan for Completing the Bay Area Ridge Trail (BARTC)*.

Finally, the proposed project is appropriate for prioritization under the selection criteria set forth in Section 31163(c) for the following reasons:

- (1) The proposed project is supported by adopted local and regional plans. The Ridge Trail is specifically recognized in the California Recreational Trail Plan, the San Francisco Bay Area's regional Priority Conservation Area Plan, by the East Bay Regional Park District, by all nine Bay Area County General or Master Trail Plans, in all relevant regional park and open space district plans, and in many other local plans and policies.
- (2) The proposed project is multi-jurisdictional and serves a regional constituency by contributing toward the completion of a regional trail system that links ridgetops throughout the nine counties of the San Francisco Bay Area.
- (3) The proposed project can be implemented in a timely manner, because the proposed project supports BARTC's continuing efforts, which are ready to proceed due to previous Conservancy planning authorizations (See Project History, above).

- (4) The proposed project provides benefits that could be lost if the project is not quickly implemented, as there is current momentum built from the work supported by the previous Conservancy grants. A loss of opportunity to establish the Ridge Trail in gap areas lying over private properties exists due to competing development projects on those properties that could be inconsistent with the Ridge Trail.
- (5) The proposed project leverages matching funds from several sources, both public and private. (See Project Financing, above).

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

Consistent with **Goal 13, Objective F** of the Conservancy’s 2018 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will plan for the development of approximately 45 miles of the Bay Area Ridge Trail. In addition, consistent with **Goal 13, Objective A**, this authorization will help develop a plan for projects that provide recreational facilities such as picnic areas, parking lots, and interpretive signs as part of developing Ridge Trail staging areas. Furthermore, the proposed project is consistent with **Goal 13, Objective H** to develop a plan for links between the Ridge Trail and other regional trails. Finally, consistent with **Goal 11, Objective A**, this project will update plans that help the Conservancy identify and prioritize resource and recreational goals, including projects that improve public access.

**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 Ridge Trail is specifically recognized in the California Recreational Trail Plan, as well as numerous regional and local plans including the San Francisco Bay Area’s regional Priority Conservation Area program, all nine Bay Area County General or Master Trail Plans, all relevant regional park and open space district plans, and dozens of local plans and policies.
4. **Support of the public:** The California State Legislature passed a resolution in 1990 to “recognize the value of the Bay Area Ridge Trail to the people of the Bay Area and encourage the creation of trails in the San Francisco Bay Area.” The Ridge Trail enjoys widespread recognition and support among State, regional and local governments, stakeholders, advocacy groups and the public. The Ridge Trail Council has a base of 4,000 members and volunteers who participate in trail advocacy, building, stewardship, and public events. (See project letters in Exhibit 3).

5. **Location:** The Bay Area Ridge Trail is located exclusively in the nine counties that make up the San Francisco Bay Area (Alameda, Contra Costa, Marin, Napa, San Francisco, San Mateo, Santa Clara, Solano, and Sonoma), and is thus entirely within the jurisdiction of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program.
6. **Need:** The Conservancy has played a major role in supporting completion of the Bay Area Ridge Trail; without Conservancy participation, the majority of BARTC's work could not occur, and region-wide planning for completion of the Ridge Trail could become fragmented and/or halt altogether.
7. **Greater-than-local interest:** The Bay Area Ridge Trail is a regional trail running through all nine Bay Area counties. In addition, the spectacular scenic views, opportunities for extended trips and connectivity to other trail systems, parks and natural areas enhance the appeal of the Ridge Trail as a destination for visitors from outside the Bay Area.
8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The Bay Area Ridge Trail is by definition to be aligned high on the ridgetops encircling San Francisco Bay. The proposed project will therefore not be vulnerable to the sea level rise.

Additional Criteria

9. **Urgency:** The BARTC currently is pursuing a large number of trail opportunities that, without funding, may experience significant delays or be foreclosed.
11. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
12. **Conflict resolution:** As a regional amenity that crosses a host of jurisdictions, the Ridge Trail provides an opportunity to transfer best practices, management guidelines, and apply lessons learned that reduce conflict over local trails.
13. **Innovation:** BARTC pursues its work across a very large and diffuse network of partners and volunteer groups with a high level of coordination and outreach. This results in an innovative ability to push many different segments of trail simultaneously, allowing each to proceed at a pace and scale that suits local needs but provides regional results.
14. **Readiness:** The BARTC has been successfully working towards completion of the Ridge Trail for over 20 years and is prepared to continue this work under a new authorization.
15. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See "Project History" above.
16. **Return to Conservancy:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
17. **Cooperation:** The wide range of partners and volunteer groups that work with the BARTC result in a remarkable level of support and coordination in developing trail opportunities. The BARTC regularly works with dozens of local agencies, non-profits, private corporations, local advocates, political leaders, landowners and citizen groups in making the trail a reality.
19. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** The Ridge Trail endeavors to provide alternatives to motorized transportation and in general seeks to implement low-maintenance, sustainable trail design and materials that lowers the life cycle emissions of the trail.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The proposed authorization is to fund the preliminary planning work necessary to advance Bay Area Ridge Trail projects, including identifying and refining the trail route, negotiating and developing agreements for the acquisition of property, planning and designing specific segments, and preparing environmental review documents, maps and permit applications.

The proposed project is statutorily exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to California Code of Regulations, Title 14 Section 15262 (“Feasibility and Planning Studies”) because the proposed project is for feasibility and planning studies for possible future actions which the Conservancy has not approved, adopted, or funded.

The proposed project is also categorically exempt from CEQA pursuant to California Code of Regulations, Title 14 Section 15306 (“Information Collection”) in that it will include basic data collection and resource evaluation activities, including those necessary for planning, designing, and preparing environmental review documents for Ridge Trail projects. None of these activities will result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource

Staff will file a Notice of Exemption for the proposed project upon approval.