

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
September 14, 2023

**HERON'S HEAD PARK CLIMATE RESILIENCE PROJECT**

Project No. 23-062-01  
Project Manager: Erica Johnson

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$1,781,600 to Literacy for Environmental Justice to implement the Heron's Head Park Climate Resilience Project consisting of enhancing 9 acres of wetland adjacent upland habitat, providing job training to 40-60 local young adults, and hosting 15-20 stewardship days annually at Heron's Head Park in the City and County of San Francisco.

**LOCATION:** Heron's Head Park, City and County of San Francisco

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*EXHIBITS*

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Maps](#)  
Exhibit 2: [Proposed Habitat Enhancement Map](#)  
Exhibit 3: [Project Letters of Support](#)
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**RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS**

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution and findings.

Resolution:

The State Coastal Conservancy ("Conservancy") hereby authorizes a grant of an amount not to exceed one million seven hundred and eighty-one thousand and six hundred dollars (\$1,781,600) to Literacy for Environmental Justice ("the grantee") to implement the Heron's Head Park Climate Resilience Project consisting of enhancing 9 acres of wetland adjacent upland habitat to address climate change impacts, provide environmental job training to 40-60 local young adults, and host 15-20 stewardship days annually at Heron's Head Park in the City and County of San Francisco (the "project").

Prior to commencement of the project, the grantee shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (Executive Officer) the following:

- A detailed work program, schedule, and budget.
- Names and qualifications of any contractors to be retained in carrying out the project.

- A plan for acknowledgement of Conservancy funding.
- Evidence that all permits and approvals required to implement the project have been obtained.
- Evidence that the grantee has entered into agreements sufficient to enable the grantee to implement, operate, and maintain the project.

Findings:

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

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with Chapter 3 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the Climate Ready Program.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.
3. Literacy for Environmental Justice is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.

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## STAFF RECOMMENDATION

### PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a \$1,781,600 grant to Literacy for Environmental Justice (LEJ) to implement the Heron's Head Park Climate Resilience Project which will enhance 9 acres of wetland-adjacent upland habitat (upland habitat) to address climate change impacts at Heron's Head Park and provide paid environmental job training to young adults of the Bayview Hunters Point (BVHP) community, who will help complete the work over the next 5 years.

Heron's Head Park is a 22.5-acre open space located along the shoreline in southeast San Francisco in the BVHP area (Exhibit A). The park is known for its abundance of wildlife (birds, small mammals, reptiles, amphibians) and has one of the few wetlands in the city. The proposed project focuses on the wetland-adjacent, 9-acre upland habitat.

Currently, the upland habitat lacks the connectivity, habitat structure, and plant communities to provide climate resilient ecological value to wildlife. The upland habitat is bisected by redundant social pathways, disrupting the continuity of habitat cover and connectivity to the adjacent wetland habitat. Continuity is key to provide cover from predation for wildlife moving between habitats or seeking refuge during extreme storm and tidal events. The project area is also dominated by highly flammable non-native annual grasses. These grasses caught fire in 2018 and 2020. The most recent fire in June of 2020 burned 3 acres of the park near the educational center (the EcoCenter), and evidence of the burns is still apparent today. The grasses pose a risk to infrastructure and overall resilience of the park habitat during extreme drought. Lastly, the project area lacks shade cover. The site was capped with clay to prevent mobilization of contaminants from previous bay fill, limiting the areas where trees can be planted. LEJ has worked with the landowner to identify suitable areas for tree cover that will provide additional habitat structure and shade for wildlife, and shade visitors during increasingly hot days. To accomplish the restoration over the 5-year grant period, LEJ will conduct community stewardship days in partnership with San Francisco Recreation and Parks

Department, train and hire community interns, and present project updates to park and community stakeholder groups.

The specific project tasks are described further below:

- Eco-Apprentice Program: LEJ's ongoing Eco-Apprentice program will provide paid training and work to local, young adults (ages 18-25) in native plant identification, propagation, invasive plant management techniques, basic shoreline habitat ecology, and community stewardship event coordination. Participants of the program will be engaged in a cohort for one year. LEJ anticipates recruiting between 8-12 participants per year during the 5-year grant program (40-60 participants total).
- Native Plant Propagation: LEJ staff and Eco-Apprentices will grow approximately 50,000 native plants and 30 trees at its native plant nurseries in BVHP and Treasure Island. The native plants will include coastal perennial grasses and forbs, coastal sage scrub habitat species, and oak woodland understory species. Native tree species will include oaks, toyon, Islay cherry, willows, and buckeye. The plant palette will be determined with additional consultation from project partners.
- Invasive Plant Management:
  - a. Hand removal: LEJ staff, Eco-Apprentices, and community volunteers will remove non-native plants such as wild oat, riggut brome, perennial fescue, Pampas grass, French broom, fennel, and Russian star thistle.
  - b. Timed mowing: LEJ staff and Eco-Apprentices will conduct approximately three mowing events per year between February and April and a third in July or August depending on the rainfall. The earlier mowing events will help reduce annual invasive seed dispersal and the later mowing event will help reduce fire fuel load and thin out invasive grasses to support the establishment of native perennial grass and forb plantings.
- Native Plant Restoration:
  - a. Planting: LEJ staff, Eco-Apprentices, and community volunteers will outplant approximately 0.75 acres of oak woodland and understory habitat, 5.25 acres of native coastal scrub habitat, and 3 acres of native coastal perennial grass habitat to complete 9 acres of diverse upland habitat (Exhibit B).
  - b. Social Pathways Reduction Planning: Planning for native plant restoration will include an assessment of social pathways in the project area. Although not all social paths will be removed, LEJ plans on revegetating at least 50% of the pathways that are not often used for community programming or other public uses (such as fishing).
- Community Engagement and Stewardship:
  - a. Community stewardship: San Francisco Recreation and Park Department (SFRPD) manages the Heron's Head Park programming at the EcoCenter and holds regular community volunteer stewardship days at the park (approximately 20 per year). LEJ will partner with SFRPD to provide volunteers the opportunity to take part in the proposed project.
  - b. Project presentations: LEJ staff and Eco-Apprentices will receive project feedback and provide project updates to the following community stakeholder groups: SFRPD's EcoCenter Advisory Committee, Bayview-Hunters Point Environmental Justice Task Force, India Basin Neighborhood Association, Bayview-Hunters Point Mobilization for

Adolescent Growth in our Communities (BMAGIC) Parks Collaborative, the Association of Ramaytush Ohlone, San Francisco Biodiversity Working Group, and Port of San Francisco's Southern Advisory Committee.

**Site Description:**

Heron's Head Park is owned and managed by the Port of San Francisco (the Port), while the EcoCenter and stewardship of the park is managed by SFRPD. The park is a 22.5-acre open space located on a peninsula extending out into the San Francisco Bay from the southeastern shoreline of San Francisco. The park comprises the northern end of India Basin and southern end of Lashlighter Basin. The park was once a bay fill project led by the Port, known as Pier 98, which was meant to serve container ships. A change in policy regarding bay fill halted the project in 1977. As the Port and regulatory agencies struggled to decide what to do with the incomplete development, waves and tidal action developed it into a wetland and a known birding location. In 1998, the Port removed about 5,000 tons of debris and fill, developed the park, and expanded the wetland habitat.

Today the park offers recreational amenities such as pedestrian trails, picnic tables, fishing along the shoreline, a nature play area, and the EcoCenter. The park contains a mosaic of shoreline habitats, including approximately 4.5 acres of subtidal habitat, 9 acres of wetland habitat (intertidal and transition zone) and 9 acres of wetland adjacent upland habitat. Together these shoreline habitats support over 200 species of resident and migratory birds, several state-listed special status species (North American green sturgeon, steelhead, Chinook salmon, and longfin smelt), and federally listed endangered species (Ridgway's rail and California seablite).

At the Conservancy's May 5, 2022, meeting the Board authorized a grant to be reimbursed by the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service's National Coastal Wetlands Conservation Grant Program to support a shoreline stabilization project at the park. The shoreline stabilization project used nature-based solutions to prevent the loss of habitat to erosion and sea level rise through 2050. As part of the shoreline stabilization project, LEJ has already begun to restore 7 acres of wetland (intertidal and transition zone) habitat over a 5-year grant period, anticipated to be completed by 2028.

The project is located adjacent to the Bay View Hunters Point (BVHP) community, comprised of the India Basin, Hunters Point, and Bayview neighborhoods. The BVHP area is known for its heavy industrial use and a history of race and class discrimination of its residents. Today the neighborhood is still considered a high poverty area according to the 2020 census data and residents are predominantly Black, Latinx, and Asian. In addition, residents bear a disproportionately high level of environmental burden (Cal-Enviro Screen 4.0) and continue to advocate today for environmental justice and clean-up of toxic substances from the former Naval Shipyard, which was a declared a superfund site requiring long term clean up in back in 1989. Strong community advocacy and partnerships with non-profits, local government, and landowners, has resulted in numerous parks and restored open space along the India Basin shoreline. Key examples include the Candlestick Point State Recreation Area, Heron's Head Park, and an ongoing redevelopment project at 4 other locations along the India Basin Shoreline (India Basin Shoreline Park, 900 Innes, India Basin Open Space, 700 Innes).

**Grant Applicant Qualifications:**

LEJ is a non-profit, community-based organization that has deep roots in the BVHP community. The organization was created specifically to address the ecological and health concerns of the BVHP and the surrounding communities of southeast San Francisco and specializes in engaging community volunteers to care for their open spaces and parks, empowering young adults through their Eco-Apprentice program, and growing locally adapted native species for shoreline habitats. LEJ has previous experience implementing and engaging community around environmental restoration projects in southeast San Francisco, including Candlestick Point State Recreation (Sunrise Point, Yosemite Slough, Last Port, Candlestick Meadows), and Pier 94 (wetlands area), Yerba Buena Island (stormwater management swales and gardens). LEJ has managed multiple projects at Heron's Head Park as a subcontractor to the Port and as a direct grantee, including multiple Coastal Conservancy grants:

- October 2003 authorization for the construction of the EcoCenter.
- December 2007 authorization for the initial restoration of Heron's Head Park wetlands.
- Subcontractor to the May 2022 authorization to the Port of San Francisco for the shoreline stabilization project which included the restoration of the Heron's Head Park wetlands after construction.

In addition, LEJ has formed key partnerships to be able to implement the project. LEJ is working on a new site control agreement with SFRPD (under their site agreement with the Port) to be able to implement the work. Both the Port and SFRPD are supportive of the project and arrangement, as indicated in their letters (Exhibit C).

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria, last updated on September 23, 2021, in the following respects:

**Selection Criteria**

**1. Extent to which the project helps the Conservancy accomplish the objectives in the Strategic Plan.**

See the "Consistency with Conservancy's Strategic Plan" section below.

**2. Project is a good investment of state resources.**

The project will serve an underserved community by supporting their stewardship of a local park visited by the residents and people around the San Francisco Bay Area because it is a known birding location. The project is CEQA-exempt and the landowner is supportive, thus the proposed project can be implemented as soon as the funds become available. The revegetation effort will be more efficient if implemented immediately because LEJ's staff and equipment will already be on site for other planned work in the park wetland. In addition, the invasive, annual grasses still pose a fire risk. The project is feasible to implement because LEJ has a strong partnership with the Port (landowner) and SFRPD, and has experienced field staff who have worked on multiple phases of the project.

The project advances the state's **30X30 Executive Order** by subcontracting to the Association of Ramaytush Ohlone for incorporating traditional ecological knowledge in the planting palette and hosting educational workshops (Strategy 6.4); working with local stakeholders to ensure appropriate use of native plants and seed sources (Strategy 6.5); and implementing restoration that allows protection of near shore areas from storm surge or sea level rise (Strategy 6.17). The proposed project is also consistent with the following regional and local plans:

- **Baylands Ecosystem Habitat Goals Report (1999):** The Goals Report presents goals and recommendations to restore vital habitat in the Bay area. The project will support the regional goal to protect the shoreline ecosystem, which includes adjacent upland habitat.
- **Baylands Ecosystem Habitat Goals Science Update (2015):** The Update documents the progress made toward achieving the 1999 Baylands Goals and outlines strategies for continuing restoration progress in face of climate change and sea-level rise. The project is consistent with the update's recommendations to design and restore complete tidal wetland systems that include active revegetation, in this case of the upland habitat adjacent to the shoreline.
- **San Francisco General Plan Recreation and Open Space Element and Environmental Protection Element (March 2014):** The project promotes open space and recreation activities that improve resident's physical and mental health, environmental sustainability, address environmental justice across a community, and provides tangible economic benefit.
- **Bayview Hunters Point Area Plan (2010):** The project protects well-designed open space, improves the overall environmental quality of the area, and revitalizes the community and local economy.

### **3. Project benefits will be sustainable or resilient over the project lifespan.**

The project will help prepare and adapt the park to climate change impacts, including extreme heat, drought, storm surges, and high tide events. The habitat connectivity that the project will establish between the wetland and adjacent upland habitat will allow wildlife to find refuge at higher elevations during high tides. The native plant palette will include plant species that are tolerant to saltwater intrusion. LEJ also plans to plant native perennial bunch grasses that have the potential to live approximately 100 years, promote increased soil carbon storage, and reduce fire risk, thus decreasing greenhouse gas emissions. In addition, the bunch grass plantings will improve habitat cover and mobility for small mammals, amphibians, and reptiles. The increased vegetation in the upland habitat will also reduce stormwater sediment loading and runoff into the adjacent wetland and bay waters.

The Port (landowner) and SFRPD (EcoCenter and on-site community programs manager) are committed to the long-term management and stewardship of Heron's Head Park. The proposed project includes five years of vegetation management during which time LEJ will monitor and care for the plants until they are well established.

### **4. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.**

In addition to the climate adaptation, improved habitat quality, and carbon storage described in the “Project Description” and “Project benefits will be sustainable or resilient over the project lifespan” sections above, the project will also provide the following benefits:

- Enhanced recreation experience for community and visitors who can enjoy shade during increased heat days at the park from increased tree canopy and better environmental quality of the open space.
- Benefits to the adjacent underserved community, BVHP, by providing environmental education via workshops and stewardship opportunities (more details can be found in the “Project Site” section above and benefits to the community in “Project Description” section above).
- Benefits to the local work force in the BVHP by providing paid workforce training for environmental jobs via the Eco-Apprentice Program (more details in “Project Description” section above).

**5. Project planned with meaningful community engagement and broad community support.**

LEJ staff and Eco-Apprentices were either long-time residents of the community, grew up in the community, or are currently part of the community, particularly the Eco-Apprentices. They will be receiving feedback on the project at meetings with park stakeholders which include community advocacy groups, landowners, and other stakeholders (see “Project Description” above for the list of committees and organizations).

**PROJECT FINANCING**

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b>	<b>\$1,781,600</b>
<b>Project Total</b>	<b>\$1,781,600</b>

Conservancy funding is anticipated to come from Fiscal Year 2022/23 appropriation of the General Fund for the purpose of climate resilience (Budget Act 2022, SB 154). These funds are available for the purposes set forth in Section 52 of Chapter 258 of the Statutes of 2021, which sets forth a detailed description of the purposes of the climate resilience funds and includes projects for the purpose of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program established pursuant to Chapter 4.5 (commencing with Section 31160) of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code. The proposed project is consistent with this funding source because it is located within the geographic boundary and supports the goals of San Francisco Bay Program (see Consistency with Conservancy’s Enabling Legislation section, below).

Unless specifically identified as “Required Match,” the other sources of funding and in-kind contributions described above are estimates. The Conservancy does not typically require matching funds or in-kind services, nor does it require documentation of expenditures from other funders or of in-kind services. Typical grant conditions require grantees to provide any funds needed to complete a project.

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

The proposed project is consistent with Section 31162 of Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code which authorizes projects located within the San Francisco Bay program jurisdiction Program, which is consistent with:

Section 31162 Subsection (a) to “improve public access to, within, and around the bay, coast, ridgetops, and urban spaces [...]” by improving the park habitat amenities and resilience to climate impacts.

Section 31162 Subsection (b) to “protect, restore, and enhance natural habitats and connecting corridors, watersheds, scenic areas, and other open-space resources of regional importance” by enhancing 9 acres of wetland adjacent upland habitat and improving habitat connectivity and refuge for wildlife.

Section 31162 Subsection (c) to “assist in the implementation of the policies and programs of the California Coastal Act of 1976 (Division 20 (commencing with Section 30000)), the San Francisco Bay Plan, and the adopted plans of local governments and special districts.” The project is consistent with multiple local and regional plans (see “**Project is a good investment of state resources**” section above).

Section 31162 Subsection (d) to “promote, assist, and enhance projects that provide open space and natural areas that are accessible to urban populations for recreational and educational purposes.” The project is accessible to urban populations for recreation and education.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S [2023-2027 STRATEGIC PLAN](#):**

Consistent with **Goal 1.1, Commit Funding to Benefit Systemically Excluded Communities**, the proposed project will enhance habitat value, climate resilience, park amenities to a park located in the BVHP area, which is also a systematically excluded community (see “Project Site” section above).

Consistent with **Goal 1.3, Support Meaningful Engagement by Systematically Excluded Communities**, the proposed project will engage community groups and the Association of the Ramaytush Ohlone in stakeholder meetings, provide educational workshops, and community stewardship days (see “Project Description” above).

Consistent with **Goal 1.4, Incorporate Workforce Development in Our Projects**, the proposed project will provide environmental job training to between 40-60 young adults in the BVHP community over the 5-year grant period (see “Project Description” section above).

Consistent with **Goal 3.2, Restore or Enhance Habitats**, the proposed project will enhance 9 acres of upland habitat for the benefit of birds, small mammals, reptiles, and amphibians (see “Project Description” section above).

Consistent with **Goal 4.3, Multi-benefit Nature-based Climate Adaptation**, the proposed project's habitat enhancements will provide multiple climate change adaptations (see “Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact” section above).



**CEQA COMPLIANCE:**

The project is categorically exempt from review under CEQA Guidelines Section 15304 Minor Alterations to Land (14 Cal. Code Regs. §15333), subsection (b) "New gardening or landscaping, including the replacement of existing conventional landscaping with water efficient or fire-resistant landscaping" because removing invasive species and planting native plants are landscaping activities that will replace the conventional landscaping with water-efficient and fire-resistant landscaping. In addition, the activities do not involve removal of healthy, mature, scenic trees or grading. Upon approval of the project, Conservancy staff will file a Notice of Exemption.