

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

April 18, 2024

**PETALUMA RIVER GREENWAY PLANNING – CORONA REACH**

Project No. 23-073-01

Project Manager: Virgilio Cuasay

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$435,000 to the Friends of the Petaluma River to conduct preliminary planning, including community engagement, baseline assessments and feasibility studies, and draft conceptual design for a segment of the proposed urban greenway known as the Petaluma River Greenway in the City of Petaluma, Sonoma County.

**LOCATION:** Petaluma, Sonoma County

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EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [Photos](#)

Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)

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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 hereby authorizes a grant of an amount not to exceed four hundred thirty-five thousand dollars (\$435,000) to Friends of the Petaluma River (“the grantee”) to conduct preliminary planning, including community engagement, baseline assessments and feasibility studies, and draft conceptual design for a segment of the proposed urban greenway known as the Petaluma River Greenway in the City of Petaluma, Sonoma County.

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:

1. A detailed work program, schedule, and budget.
2. Names and qualifications of any contractors to be retained in carrying out 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 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the San Francisco Bay Area Program.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.
3. The Friends of the Petaluma River 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 grant of an amount not to exceed \$435,000 to the Friends of the Petaluma River (FOPR) to conduct preliminary planning, including community engagement, baseline assessments and feasibility studies, and draft conceptual design for the most upstream segment of the future urban greenway known as the Petaluma River Greenway (Greenway) in the City of Petaluma, Sonoma County (Exhibit 1, Figure 1).

The vision for the Petaluma River Greenway is a continuous riparian corridor along the river for recreation, natural habitats, economic development, and flood control comprised of six “segments” (Exhibit 1, Figures 2 and 3) running from Old Redwood Highway, upstream, to Petaluma Marsh, downstream, as articulated in the Conservancy-funded 1996 Petaluma River Access and Enhancement Plan (Plan). The greenway would connect many centers of activity and greenspaces within the city through a continuous trail system.

Of the six segments of the Petaluma River, the upstream segment, containing the Corona Reach, is considered the largest and most environmentally sensitive according to the Plan. The Corona Reach is also a park poor area of Petaluma surrounded primarily by residential and commercial zones with very few large parks in the near vicinity. Local and regional development needs exacerbate the potential for the area to be developed for both commercial and residential uses, which are allowed by the City of Petaluma’s (the City) zoning code. In addition, extreme storm events caused by climate change, such as those that affected the San Francisco Bay Area in January 2023 (Exhibit 2, Figure 4), cause flooding within the project area. These complex existing conditions call for a careful approach to development that balances natural resource conservation with the City’s needs for public access and flood control. For these reasons, the proposed project will focus on planning a segment of the greenway in the Corona Reach, along the Petaluma River between Corona Road at the north end and the confluence of the river and the Lynch Creek Trail at the south end (Exhibit 1, Figure 2). This segment of the Greenway is envisioned as 176-acres of open space with restored and enhanced riparian habitat and approximately 1.8 miles of multi-use trails. The project will preserve the river corridor’s natural resources while also providing climate change resilience, public access, and habitat restoration opportunities.

Through their in-kind support, Sonoma Land Trust conducted initial outreach to project area landowners to determine the feasibility of acquiring key properties and to obtain the necessary permissions to conduct studies. This initial landowner outreach provides the impetus for the planning activities that make up the scope of this project. The recommended grant is for preliminary planning of the greenway with tasks that include the following:

1. conducting baseline assessments and feasibility studies
2. drafting an existing conditions report
3. conducting a collaborative community engagement process
4. drafting conceptual designs for public access and restoration

The community engagement element of this project consists of a participatory and community-led process that includes the formation of a Greenway Community Advisory Committee, comprised of community members, who will play an active role in the project by co-leading engagement activities while also providing input into project design. These activities are envisioned to prepare participants for habitat restoration and stewardship activities post project. FOPR will engage any tribes with cultural and historical ties to the project site and involve them with the development of the concept plan. Community participants as well as Tribal representatives will receive stipends for their time. In order to address the Project's potential for the unintended displacement of residents near the site, FOPR will procure a baseline conditions socioeconomic report and engage housing advocacy organizations to be involved in project outcomes.

An approximately 1.8-mile multi-use trail will be planned within the project boundaries that will contribute to a larger local trail network (Exhibit 1, Figure 5) and connect to Petaluma's other parks, including the Conservancy-funded Petaluma River Park, once complete. Specifically, this 1.8-mile section will close gaps in Petaluma's existing bicycle and pedestrian network, facilitating connections to the SMART pathway and the Lynch Creek Trail (which is itself part of the Bay Area Ridge Trail).

Project activities are expected to conclude approximately a year after starting.

**Site Description:** The project site is located within the Corona Reach of the Petaluma River in the upper Petaluma River watershed, beginning approximately 1.5 miles from Downtown Petaluma at the confluence of the river and the Lynch Creek Trail and ending upstream at Corona Road. Seventeen parcels make up the project site. The site consists of a variety of habitats, including the largest area of riparian forest within the City of Petaluma where willows and California box elder trees stand, along with oak woodlands (Exhibit 2, Figure 2) and grasslands. Numerous wildlife species have been observed in the project area that utilize the water and upland habitat along the river corridor, including the following special status species: Chinook salmon (federally threatened), Pacific lamprey (California Department of Fish and Wildlife [CDFW] Species of Special Concern), California red-legged frog (federally threatened, CDFW Species of Special Concern), American peregrine falcon (CDFW fully protected), white-tailed kite (CDFW fully protected), and great egret (CDFW sensitive). This portion of the river is also included in the designation of the Critical Habitat of Central California Coast Evolutionarily Significant Unit of Steelhead Trout (federally threatened).

The City of Petaluma has a population of just under 60,800, and, according to the 2020 census, over a quarter of the city’s population lives within a quarter mile of an off-street bike path leading to the proposed greenway; thus, over a quarter of the population, including nearby disadvantaged communities, can reach the greenway without biking or walking on a street. The project is within one mile of 15 schools, nine of which are elementary schools, providing walking-distance opportunities for outdoor and science education. It is also connected to several recreation centers, other trails, city destinations, and commercial centers.

**Grant Applicant Qualifications:** FOPR has been a leader in environmental protection, community education, and grassroots organizing in the Petaluma since 2005. FOPR is known for collaboration and inclusivity and has led regional partnerships in support of restoration and environmental education. Since 2009, FOPR has partnered with the City of Petaluma to create and manage Steamer Landing Park and the David Yearsley River Heritage Center with access to the Petaluma River, open space, and marsh habitat. FOPR offers a robust suite of programs to provide community access, education, and conservation opportunities in support of the Petaluma River Watershed. FOPR has been managing grants since 2008. These grants include a grant from the City of Petaluma to rebuild the dock at Steamer Landing Park, a grant from CDFW for marsh restoration, education and outreach, several grants through NOAA's B-WET program, and a grant funded through the Conservancy’s Explore the Coast program.

**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.**

Once implemented, the project will contribute to improving Petaluma’s river corridor by satisfying the local need for equitable open space in a park-poor urban area of the city, offering surrounding communities the opportunity to recreate near their homes, engage in water-based recreation, and access nature. The project will protect and restore the riparian zone and its natural resources, improve local trail connectivity, and reduce flood risk by preventing development in the 100-year flood plain. Lastly, the project is consistent with the City of Petaluma’s 2008 General Plan and 1996 Petaluma River Access and Enhancement Plan. FOPR will leverage Conservancy funds to secure funders for acquisition and implementation.

**3. Project includes a serious effort to engage tribes. Examples of tribal engagement include good faith, documented efforts to work with tribes traditionally and culturally affiliated to the project area.**

The project's community engagement activities will include meetings with tribes that have historical and cultural associations with the project area, who will be engaged to develop a shared vision for the project that reflects the significance of the river to the Tribal community. FOPR will provide stipends to Tribal representatives for their time.

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

The project is designed to address tidal fluctuations from San Pablo Bay, sea-level rise, and flooding from extreme storms through open space protection, habitat restoration, and by preventing development along the riparian corridor. The plant palette created through the project will account for high heat and drought scenarios while also providing carbon sequestration. FOPR has initiated discussions with appropriate agencies for long-term management of the site once it's been constructed.

**5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.**

The project will deliver a long list of benefits including:

- Promoting equitable access to the riverfront greenway by developing the riverfront park using input gathered from local and regional residents representing all age groups and abilities, families, underserved communities, tribal members, and communities of color;
- Planning for restoring 176 acres of riparian and upland habitat using evidence-based approaches, including 1.6 miles along the river;
- Protecting habitat for sensitive wildlife and aquatic species;
- Enhancing climate resilience by protecting carbon sequestration potential, improving habitat connectivity, minimizing flooding, and increasing stormwater capture; and
- Completing the planning necessary to promote equitable recreation and public access to the river by planning for future trails that fulfill key gaps in the City's bikeway plan, contributing 1.8 miles to the planned Petaluma River Trail and providing connections to the open space amenities on the East side of the City.

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

FOPR has integrated interactive and participatory elements into their engagement process, including the planned formation of an advisory committee consisting of members of the communities being served, visioning and training workshops, and participant-led meetings. It will build on the comprehensive engagement work the Petaluma River Park Foundation is completing for its own River Park project when possible and to prevent meeting fatigue caused by duplicative efforts. Local stakeholders will include tribal communities, Latinx, Black, Asian American and Pacific Islander people, youth, people with disabilities, the elderly, and the unhoused. All stakeholders will be able to provide input on park, trail, habitat, transportation, displacement, and development issues. Outreach materials will be available in multiple

languages, including English and Spanish, and nature-based childcare will be provided to facilitate attendance. Participants will be compensated for their time.

**PROJECT FINANCING**

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b>	<b>\$435,000</b>
City of Petaluma	\$100,000
Sonoma Land Trust	<u>\$50,000</u>
<b>Project Total</b>	<b>\$585,000</b>

Conservancy funding is anticipated to come from a Fiscal Year 2022/23 appropriation from the General Fund to the Conservancy for the purpose of “urgent sea level rise adaptation needs and coastal resilience using nature-based solution and other strategies.” (Budget Act of 2022, SB 154, as amended by the Budget Act of 2023, SB 101.). The coastal resilience funds are available as described in Section 52 of Chapter 258 of the Statutes of 2021, which sets forth a detailed description of the purposes of the coastal resilience funds. The proposed project is consistent with this funding source because it is a project for the purpose of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program (Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Government Code), as described further below.

The City of Petaluma will contribute \$100,000 towards community engagement and conceptual design expenses.

Sonoma Land Trust will contribute \$50,000 for community engagement and conceptual design expenses in addition to approximately \$75,000 worth of in-kind support towards project management and property acquisition.

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:**

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 recommended authorization is to grant funds to FOPR, a nonprofit grantee, to undertake planning for the Petaluma River Greenway.

The proposed project is consistent with the following provisions of Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, Sections 31162 et seq. regarding the San Francisco Bay Area Program, which states the Conservancy may undertake projects and award grants in the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area that will help achieve the following goals of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program:

- Section 31162(a) states that the Conservancy can undertake projects that improve public access to, within, and around the bay, coast, ridgetops, and urban open spaces, consistent with the rights of private property owners, and without having a significant adverse impact on agricultural operations and environmentally sensitive areas and wildlife. The proposed project will enable FOPR to plan for development and implementation of the Petaluma River Greenway, an urban open space within the San Francisco Bay Area.
- Section 31162(b) states that the Conservancy can undertake projects that protect, restore, and enhance natural habitats and connecting corridors, watersheds, scenic areas, and other open-space resources of regional importance. The proposed project will include conceptual design for restoring and enhancing an upstream segment of the regionally significant Petaluma River corridor.
- Section 31162(d) states that the Conservancy can undertake projects that promote, assist, and enhance projects that provide open space and natural areas that are accessible to urban populations for recreational and educational purposes. The proposed project will enable the Conservancy to assist FOPR to plan and implement the Petaluma River Greenway for recreational and educational purposes for urban populations.

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

Consistent with **Goal 2.4, Build Trails**, the recommended grant is for planning an approximately 1.8-mile riverfront trail.

Consistent with **Goal 3.2, Restore or Enhance Habitats**, the recommended grant is for planning to protect, restore, or enhance approximately 176 acres of riverfront habitat.

**CEQA COMPLIANCE:**

The proposed project is exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to the CEQA Guidelines at California Code of Regulations, Title 14, Sections 15262, which exempts feasibility and planning studies for possible future actions from the requirement to prepare an Environmental Impact Report or negative declaration, and 15306, which exempts basic data collection, research, and resource evaluation activities that will not disturb environmental resources. The proposed project consists of planning activities, preparation of designs, and review of environmental effects, none of which will impact any environmental resources and all of which will be undertaken for possible future actions that the Conservancy has not yet approved, adopted, or funded.

Upon approval of the project, Conservancy staff will file a Notice of Exemption.