

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
June 6, 2024

**MONTEREY BAY COASTAL TRAIL - FORT ORD DUNES STATE PARK ACCESS IMPROVEMENTS**

Project No. 24-024-01  
Project Manager: Timothy Duff

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$800,000 to the City of Marina to prepare plans, environmental review documents, and permit applications for improvements to a California Coastal Trail trailhead and coastal access point at Fort Ord Dunes State Park, Monterey County.

**LOCATION:** Fort Ord Dunes State Park, Monterey County.

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EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Maps](#)
- Exhibit 2: [Project Site Maps](#)
- Exhibit 3: [Project Photos](#)
- Exhibit 4: [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 eight hundred thousand dollars (\$800,000) to the City of Marina (“the grantee”) to prepare plans, environmental review documents, and permit applications for improvements to a California Coastal Trail trailhead and coastal access point at Fort Ord Dunes State Park, Monterey 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.
3. Evidence that the grantee has entered into agreements sufficient to enable the grantee to implement, operate, and maintain the project.

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In addition, to the extent appropriate, the City of Marina shall incorporate the guidelines of the Conservancy's 'Coastal Access Project Standards'.

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 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.
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### **STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

#### **PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff recommends authorization to disburse up to \$800,000 to the City of Marina to prepare plans, environmental review documents, and permit applications for improvements to a California Coastal Trail trailhead and coastal access point at Fort Ord Dunes State Park in the Monterey County.

While there are numerous public access points with extensive amenities in the more affluent neighboring towns of Monterey, Pacific Grove, and Carmel, the disadvantaged community of Marina has just four coastal access points along its four-mile coastline, and only two with improved parking (Exhibits 1 and 2). The Fort Ord location provides the only coastal access point in the southern portion of the City, including for students at California State University Monterey Bay (CSUMB), and is the only site that does not require visitors to walk over extended stretches of unimproved sandy trails over steep dunes to access the beach. The site's large parking lot also serves as a trailhead for pedestrians and bikers accessing the California Coastal Trail (known locally as the "Monterey Bay Sanctuary Scenic Trail") that extends for over 15 miles south through Monterey and Pacific Grove.

At the proposed project site, the conditions of the existing coastal access trail, viewing area, and public facilities are in great need of improvement. A blufftop boardwalk is covered in sand and a connecting viewing platform has been lost to cliff erosion. The existing trail to the beach that is also used by emergency vehicles for public safety and rescues, has been deeply eroded and is posing a threat to visitor access as well as to public safety operations. Finally, State Parks has identified upgrading the chemical toilets at this frequently used parking area with vault toilets as a high priority. The proposed project will facilitate future construction of improvements including safe and ADA-compliant access to the park's popular bluff and beach access points, and a new restroom, while also reducing impacts to the park's sensitive dune habitat. State Parks has confirmed their commitment to work with the City of Marina on the project.

The proposed project will begin with development of community engagement and tribal participation plans that ensure community members, including tribes, students, and disadvantaged community members are able to have a voice in the scope and design of the

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proposed improvements. Early on in the planning process, the City will organize community meetings and field trips to the project site to receive initial input. All community stakeholders will be actively engaged throughout the planning process.

The proposed project entails preparation of technical studies (e.g. cultural resources, geology, hydrology, biology) needed to evaluate current site conditions and determine where the beach and bluff improvements should be located to maximize resiliency, minimize the need for repairs, and minimize impacts. In coordination with State Parks, the City will prepare several conceptual design alternatives for the site and seek broad community and agency input on these design concepts. With this input, the City will develop more detailed design alternatives and select a preferred project alternative that meets community goals for safe and resilient beach and bluff access. The project also includes environmental review and permitting for the preferred approach. In addition to the accessways, the project includes design of a new restroom to replace the existing porta-potties, and preparation of both a dune restoration plan and long-term operation and maintenance plan for the new improvements. A sign plan will also be prepared to identify locations for wayfinding and interpretive signs with draft sign designs that incorporate details on traditional ecological knowledge and indigenous history of the area.

**Site Description:** The proposed project is located at Fort Ord Dunes State Park within unincorporated Monterey County and directly adjacent to the City of Marina city-limits and California State University Monterey Bay (Exhibit 1). Designated as a disadvantaged community, Marina is located along southern Monterey Bay, bordered by Highway 1, the Pacific Ocean and Fort Ord State Park to the west, the Salinas River and agricultural land to the north, the City of Seaside to the south, and California State University Monterey Bay (CSUMB) and agricultural land to the east. Marina's coastline is characterized by an expansive dune ecosystem with sand dunes rising over 100-feet in elevation in many areas (Exhibit 2 and 3). The existing parking lot is accessed from a city street that extends inland over Highway 1 to the city's downtown district and CSUMB. The coastal access at Fort Ord Dunes state park is also accessed by walkers, runners and bicyclists using the Monterey Bay Sanctuary Scenic Trail and Beach Range Road, both of which run adjacent to Fort Ord Dunes State Park. The parking lot currently includes two chemical toilets, a sand-covered bluff trail and overlook, a trail to the beach that is currently deeply rutted and unsafe for use, and a road used for emergency beach access.

**Grant Applicant Qualifications:** Over the past five years the City of Marina has managed several state grants including Coastal Commission funding to update sections of the City's Local Coastal Program on coastal hazards, environmentally sensitive habitat, and public access. The City Council recently committed \$30,000 to hire a consulting firm to conduct initial planning for the proposed project and has committed to providing the resources needed to maintain future improvements in partnership with State Parks. City staff, with support from their consultant team, have demonstrated the capacity needed to successfully manage the proposed Conservancy grant.

### **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 is a good investment of state resources for several reasons. First, it facilitates the future construction of more accessible, safe and resilient coastal bluff and beach access within a disadvantaged community. It will also serve the CSUMB student community and visitors from around the region and beyond seeking to access the beach and adjacent California Coastal Trail. The project will be carried out in partnership with State Parks and furthers the goals identified in the "*Completing the California Coastal Trail*" Report to: foster cooperation between state and local agencies in the planning, design, and signing of the trail; create linkages to units of the State Park system; and increase accessibility to coastal resources from urban population centers. Conservancy staff have reviewed the project budget and found that it is reasonable given the scope of the project that includes robust community and tribal engagement.

**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 City of Marina will initiate outreach and remain in close communication with tribes throughout project planning. Best management practices will be incorporated into the design plans to protect cultural resources. The project will incorporate traditional ecological knowledge and indigenous history of the area into educational signage.

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

The project will evaluate a variety of design options and locations to maximize resiliency of the access improvements to sea level rise and coastal erosion. The bluff and beach access improvements will both encourage users to remain on designated paths and minimize impacts to sensitive dune habitat and reduce erosion.

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

The proposed planning to improve a beach access trail, viewing platform area, and restroom would increase equity and environmental justice by providing recreational amenities in a designated disadvantaged community. The proposed project will also protect sensitive dune habitat and public safety by restoring an access route used by emergency vehicles.

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

The planning project will begin with several community meetings and field trips to the project site to provide residents, including tribes, students, and disadvantaged community members,

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with the opportunity to help shape the project by sharing their ideas and priorities for improving coastal access. Their input will be solicited throughout the project and will inform the development of several design alternatives and the selection of the preferred alternative.

### PROJECT FINANCING

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b>	<b><u>\$800,000</u></b>
<b>Project Total</b>	<b><u>\$800,000</u></b>

Conservancy funding is anticipated to come from a Fiscal Year 2023/24 appropriation from the General Fund to the Conservancy for the purpose of “urgent sea level rise adaptation and coastal resilience needs using nature-based solutions or other strategies” (Budget Act 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, including nonmotorized trails of statewide significance. The proposed project is consistent with this funding source because it will develop plans to improve a trailhead and associated beach accessways for the California Coastal Trail, a nonmotorized trail of statewide significance.

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 Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31400-31410), regarding public access and enjoyment of coastal resources. 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. Section 31400.1 provides that the Conservancy may provide grants for public agencies to develop, operate, or manage lands for public access purposes to and along the coast. Through the proposed project, the Conservancy will help enhance and rehabilitate a coastal accessway and thereby improve access to and enjoyment of coastal resources along the Central California Coast.

Section 31400.1 requires that the Conservancy determine that the subject accessway will serve more than local public needs prior to providing a grant to a local agency. The proposed project will serve more than local public needs because it will provide improved access to the Monterey Bay shoreline, which is one of the main draws of visitors to the region, and will also provide scenic views of the Monterey Bay National Marine Sanctuary.

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

Consistent with **Goal 1, Objective 1.1**, the proposed project will improve recreation conditions and benefit a systemically excluded community.

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective 2.3**, the proposed project will prepare plans for an ADA compliant blufftop path and viewing platform.

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective 2.5**, the proposed project will prepare plans for coastal access amenities including improved parking, a restroom, and interpretive signage.

**CEQA COMPLIANCE:**

The proposed project is statutorily exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act pursuant to Title 14 California Code of Regulations (CCR), Section 15262, which exempts projects that involve only planning studies and feasibility analyses for possible future actions that have not yet been approved or funded. Consistent with this section, environmental factors will be considered in the studies undertaken pursuant to this authorization. The proposed project is also categorically exempt under 14 CCR Section 15306, which exempts basic data collection, research, and resource evaluation activities that will not result in disturbance to an environmental resource.

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