

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
November 21, 2024

CITY OF SANTA BARBARA WILDFIRE RESILIENCE PROJECT AUGMENTATION

Project No. 22-072-02
Project Manager: Rachel Couch

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$947,850 to the City of Santa Barbara to augment the Conservancy grant authorized on February 2, 2023 of \$525,000 for the Wildfire Resilience Project, and authorization to expand the project to include reducing wildland vegetation fuels on an additional approximately 25 acres across six parks, restoring native species on an additional approximately 5 acres across three of the six parks, and conducting additional community engagement activities including volunteer events in the City of Santa Barbara.

LOCATION: City of Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara County.

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)
 - Exhibit 2: [Figures and Photos](#)
 - Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)
 - Exhibit 4: [February 2, 2023 Staff Recommendation](#)
 - Exhibit 5: [Community Wildfire Protection Plan Final Program Environmental Impact Report](#) and [Public Draft Program Environmental Impact Report](#)
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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 disbursement of an amount not to exceed nine hundred forty-seven thousand eight hundred fifty dollars (\$947,850) to the City of Santa Barbara to augment the Conservancy grant authorized on February 2, 2023 of \$525,000 for a total grant amount of \$1,472,850 for the Wildfire Resilience Project (Project) and expansion of

the Project scope to: (1) reduce wildland vegetation fuels on approximately 25 additional acres across six parks; (2) restore native, fire-resilient vegetation on approximately 5 additional acres across three of the six parks; and (3) conducting additional community engagement activities including volunteer events, in the City of Santa Barbara, subject to the conditions of the February 2, 2023 authorization.

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.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize an augmentation of up to \$947,850 to the existing grant of \$525,000 to the City of Santa Barbara (“the City”) to undertake the Wildfire Resiliency Project (project) and an expansion of the project to include: (1) reducing wildland vegetation fuels on an additional approximately 25 acres across six parks; (2) restoring native, fire-resilient vegetation on an additional approximately 5 acres across three of the six parks; and (3) conducting additional community engagement activities, including volunteer events in the City of Santa Barbara. The Conservancy authorized the existing grant on February 3, 2023 (Exhibit 4). The project as originally authorized consists of reducing wildland vegetation fuels on approximately 283 acres in seven high fire hazard open space parks in Santa Barbara, purchasing equipment needed for the project, preparing planning and biological resource documents, conducting community outreach and education activities, and building capacity to implement the CWPP through hiring additional staff.

Santa Barbara and surrounding areas face a high wildfire risk due to the area’s challenging terrain, diverse vegetation, and mix of wildland and urban areas. The region has a history of severe wildfires, including the 1990 Paint Fire, 2009 Jesusita Fire, and 2017 Thomas Fire. In 2023, the City launched the project to reduce wildfire risk within open space parks, thereby reducing wildfire risk to the City and adjacent neighborhoods, and restoring native, fire-resilient plants to these parks. The project is a critical component of the City’s comprehensive Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP), which was adopted in 2021 and identifies actions that are needed to reduce wildfire risk to people, property, and open spaces.

Since the February 2023 Conservancy grant authorization, the City has conducted community outreach, completed planning documents for 7 open space parks, purchased equipment, and increased its capacity to implement the CWPP. The City is in the process of reducing wildfire fuels and is on track to complete fuel reduction work on approximately 283 acres by the end of June 2025. The proposed project expansion will conduct invasive plant removal on an

additional approximately 25 acres across six parks, three of which are part of the original project: Honda Valley, Franceschi, Stevens, and three of which are new project sites: Hidden Valley, La Mesa, and Escondido Parks (Exhibit 1). The additional 25 acres of invasive plant removal will include the removal of invasives, such as cape ivy, French broom, Italian thistle, euphorbia, and castor bean, through manual removal and implementation of the City's Integrated Pest Management Strategy, which limits the use of herbicide and pesticide application. By removing these invasives, the City will facilitate the recolonization of native species. The proposed project expansion also includes the implementation of active restoration plans for Franceschi, La Mesa, and Escondido Parks, which cumulatively total approximately 5 acres. Active restoration plans for these parks include planting, irrigation, and short-term maintenance plans. Under the original project scope, the City planned to restore 4 acres; with the expanded scope, the project will restore a total of 9 acres of habitat consistent with wildland fire management objectives. With expansion, the total acreage treated (both fuel reduction and active restoration) will be 317.

In addition, the project will be expanded to include additional community engagement activities, including a minimum of three volunteer events. Based on prior community workdays, it is anticipated that between 20-40 volunteers may participate per event. The project will continue the City's active, ongoing engagement with hundreds of community members via the City's project webpage and social media platforms.

The project uses a comprehensive strategy to improve wildfire safety that goes past the traditional approach of focusing only on fuels reduction and incorporates climate change adaptation and fire resilient revegetation. By fostering naturally resilient perennial, evergreen, low fuel loading native species, such as coast live oak, toyon, and lemonade berry, the project will reduce the intensity of future wildland fire behavior should it occur in these open spaces. Furthermore, the project will reduce the regrowth of high-risk, dense non-native vegetation like annual grasses and invasive vines that currently create fuel connectivity. The project will remove invasive species and create opportunities for the natural recolonization of native habitats, promoting community biodiversity and ecological health.

The project will introduce park visitors to well-managed open spaces with healthy, native, fire-resilient ecosystems. The City of Santa Barbara Parks and Recreation initially selected seven priority park sites that are high fire hazard areas. The project is expanded to include additional fuel reduction work in three of the seven parks and to add three additional park sites for a total of ten open space parks comprising the project sites. The six parks addressed by the expanded project scope have significant viny invasive overgrowth and high fire risk. These six parks are popular open space parks in Santa Barbara and draw visitors from across the Central Coast region, not just locally. Four of the six parks are adjacent to disadvantaged communities and two others are located within one mile of disadvantaged communities. By demonstrating what fire resiliency and healthy habitats look like in locations that are walkable and bikeable to many visitors and residents of Santa Barbara, the City can advance efforts to raise awareness about the importance of fire safety and fostering a fire-resilient community.

The project is seen as a model for other cities managing parks and wildfire risk. The project has received recognition for the collaborative approach between the City's Parks and Recreation

Department and Fire Department and its emphasis on practices that enhance native vegetation. Other communities are interested in learning from the City. In addition to local agencies and partners working on wildfire resilience in Santa Barbara County, the California Fire Foundation, City of San Luis Obispo, County of Ventura, City of Anaheim, and City of Glendale are some of the groups who have reached out, inquiring how they may replicate this approach in their areas.

Site Description: All six sites of the expanded project scope are owned and maintained by the City of Santa Barbara as a park area. All six open spaces are in residential neighborhoods of varying densities and proximities to larger wildland areas.

The open spaces are described in detail below (in alphabetical order):

- **Escondido Park** is an approximately 3-acre park located in the coastal interior zone of the High Fire Hazard Area in the City. The park has walking paths through oak woodlands, eucalyptus stands, and various patches of other ornamental or non-native vegetation, and includes approximately 1-acre of developed park space with a basketball court, picnic area, and play structure. This open space is a new project site.
- **Franceschi Park** is an approximately 17-acre park located in the foothill zone of the High Fire Hazard Area within the City. This park houses a diverse botanical collection, primarily consisting of ornamental vegetation, and beautiful views of the cityscape below. Franceschi Park is situated on a steep, south facing slope that has stands of eucalyptus trees.
- **Hidden Valley Park** is an approximately 10-acre park situated along Arroyo Burro Creek. Approximately 7-acres of the park are open space primarily composed of dense riparian vegetation, with a trail running along the length of the park along Arroyo Burro Creek. The vining, non-native cape ivy is prevalent throughout Hidden Valley Park. The remaining approximately 3 acres of parkland are maintained as developed picnic and play areas. This open space is a new project site.
- **Honda Valley Park** is an approximately 48-acre open space park, located in the coastal interior zone of the High Fire Hazard Area within the City. This park is composed of a dense mix of native and non-native vegetation communities; eucalyptus woodland stands, which shed bark that could lead to a buildup of understory ladder fuels, are prevalent in this park.
- **La Mesa Park** is an approximately 7-acre park, including both open space and developed parkland spanning Lighthouse Creek. La Mesa Park hosts a dense mix of native and non-native vegetation, with a notable eucalyptus stand that is utilized by overwintering monarchs. This open space is a new project site.
- **Stevens Park** is an approximately 26-acre park located in the foothill zone of the High Fire Hazard Area. This park is composed of a dense mix of native and non-native vegetation communities, including native oak woodland, native riparian vegetation, as well as dense stands of eucalyptus, acacia, and Peruvian pepper. Stevens Park runs along San Roque Creek and has steep slopes on either side. Stevens has a playground, picnic area, and trail system that connects to Jesusita and Arroyo Burro trails to the north.

Grant Applicant Qualifications:

The project is a partnership between the City's Park and Recreation Department and the City's Fire Department. Since 2010 the City's Fire Department has managed over \$4.2 million in grant funds, including a CAL FIRE grant of \$2,889,902 for this project. The City's Park and Recreation Department has extensive experience managing restoration projects and grants of this size, including previous Coastal Conservancy restoration grants, such as for the Arroyo Burro Open Space Restoration project in the amount of \$550,000 in 2018.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA:

The project as expanded remains 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 funding. The project is feasible, has a reasonable budget, and addresses a demonstrated need or regional problem. The project implements many statewide wildfire and forest resiliency goals. The proposed project is consistent with several state plans, and specifically with the following:

- California's Wildfire and Forest Resilience Action Plan (Governor's Forest Management Task Force, January 2021), which calls for activities, such as fuels reduction, forest thinning, vegetation management, prescribed fire, shaded fuel breaks, defensible space, and enhancement of fire-prone habitats to reduce fire risk.
- The California Forest Carbon Plan (California Natural Resources Agency, 2018), which calls for restoration of natural fire regime and forest composition through a multitude of approaches, including thinning, prescribed burns, invasive vegetation management, and shaded fuel breaks.
- The Community Wildfire Prevention & Mitigation Report (CAL FIRE, 2019), which urges state and local agencies to implement the goals of the Carbon Forest Plan and lays out recommendations to agencies to increase the scale and pace of management and mitigation actions to improve forest health and resiliency.

The project will build upon previous Conservancy and CAL FIRE investments and help reduce fire hazard in City-owned open space parks in residential neighborhoods and within CAL FIRE identified high fire severity risk zones.

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

The project will help increase fire resiliency in the City of Santa Barbara in the context of anticipated climate change. California is facing unprecedented fire risk due to climate change and a growing populace. Both the 2020 and 2021 fire seasons broke numerous records. The

2024 fire season also appears to be a treacherous one. Fires across California have burned hundreds of thousands of acres and the wildfire season is not yet over.

The project's vision and approach are long term. This project will support a comprehensive and sustainable approach to hazardous fuels management, particularly through restoration of native habitats. Native plants are well adapted to local conditions and are often naturally fire resilient so they can survive without requiring human interventions, making them both sustainable and resilient.

The active restoration component of the project has been designed with short term (likely 3-6 months) and long term (likely 1-3 years) maintenance periods that will help the sites establish fire-resilient, native habitats. Following the establishment period, the long-term maintenance of the active restoration sites will be a separate project that is funded separately by the City.

4. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

Four of the six project locations for the additional project work are adjacent to disadvantaged communities and two others are located within one mile of disadvantaged communities. This project will reduce catastrophic wildfire risk for these underserved communities.

This project aims to restore open spaces to more natural areas where native plants and wildlife can thrive. Anticipated benefits of this work include: a reduction in maintenance needs for each location; an increase in general biodiversity, including flora and fauna; an increase in native wildlife's use of the sites short and long term; a stronger, local ecosystem with restored habitat function; and more access to high quality healthy open space parks for community members.

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

The City conducts outreach to nearby residents of open spaces to receive input in advance of proposed activities. CWPP development included creation of a Public Outreach and Engagement Plan to guide community engagement and coordination with other key stakeholders throughout the planning process. The City's central engagement goal was to develop a CWPP that builds on input from key stakeholders, including community members, City departments, neighboring jurisdictions (e.g., Santa Barbara County Fire Department, the U.S. Forest Service), and CAL FIRE. Community input was sought to better understand the vulnerability of City's residents, businesses, and resources to wildfire; promote awareness of the City's wildland fire hazard; and propose workable solutions to reduce wildfire risk and provide a community forum to discuss how to mitigate wildfire risk in the City. Engagement strategies included a website with project information in Spanish and English, social media distribution of news releases and updates, and public meetings held throughout the CWPP development phase. Two public workshops were held (February and April 2020) to obtain community feedback on the preliminary analysis and scoping of the CWPP. Additional public

meetings were held at the City Planning Commission and City Council to provide updates on the development of the CWPP.

The City will confer with tribal members regarding how the project will achieve fuels management objectives while supporting natural ecosystems.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy (this authorization)	\$947,850
Coastal Conservancy (prior authorization)	\$525,000
CAL FIRE	\$2,154,290
City of Santa Barbara	\$156,300
Project Total	\$3,783,440

The above table shows the costs for the project as expanded. The anticipated source of funding for the recommended augmentation is the Fiscal Year 2022-2023 appropriation from the General Fund to the Conservancy for the purpose of wildfire risk reduction. The proposed project is consistent with the anticipated funding source because it will help reduce the risk of catastrophic wildfire. The CAL FIRE funds shown above were granted to the City’s Park and Recreation Department which is carrying out the project with the City’s Fire Department. The February 2, 2023 staff recommendation, pursuant to which the Conservancy authorized the prior grant for the project of \$525,000, inadvertently failed to accurately identify the total project costs on the project financing table.

The City of Santa Barbara initially expected to contribute \$92,300 to project costs for project management and administration but has since increased their contribution to \$156,300.

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 project is authorized for funding pursuant to Section 31113 of Chapter 3 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, which authorizes the Conservancy to address the impacts and potential impacts of climate change on resources within the Conservancy’s jurisdiction (Section 31113(a)).

Pursuant to Section 31113(b)-(c), the Conservancy is authorized to award grants to nonprofit organizations and public agencies to undertake projects within its jurisdiction that include reducing greenhouse gas emissions and addressing extreme weather events, sea level rise, flooding, and other coastal hazards that threaten coastal communities, infrastructure, and natural resources.

Pursuant to Section 31113(c), the Conservancy must prioritize grants, to the extent allowed, for projects that maximize public benefits and that accomplish one of several purposes, including reducing emissions of greenhouse gases.

Consistent with this Section, the proposed project will restore the health and resilience of California forests, grasslands, or natural lands and reduce fire risk to communities. The project will help California's natural lands be more resilient to catastrophic wildfires, which may ultimately reduce greenhouse gas emissions released from increased wildfires due to climate change.

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

Consistent with **Goal 1.1 Commit Funding to Benefit Systemically Excluded Communities**, four of the six project locations are adjacent to disadvantaged communities.

Consistent with **Goal 4.2 Wildfire Resilience Projects**, the proposed project will reduce fuels and restore native, fire-resistant vegetation on an additional approximately 30 acres.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The project as expanded remains within the scope of the Community Wildfire Protection Plan (CWPP), which is evaluated in the Community Wildfire Protection Plan Program Environmental Impact Report (CWPP PEIR) dated January 2021 and certified by the City of Santa Barbara (City), pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), on February 9, 2021 (Exhibit 5). The City has adopted a mitigation, monitoring and reporting program for the CWPP.

On February 2, 2023, the Conservancy adopted findings about the environmental effects of the CWPP based on the CWPP PEIR and authorized a grant to the City for the Wildfire Resiliency Project (previously referred to as the "City of Santa Barbara Hazardous Fuels Reduction Project"), which consists of activities within the scope of the CWPP PEIR. The proposed expansion of the project scope consists of the same type of vegetation management and wildland fire risk reduction activities (removal of invasive plants and creation of shaded fuel breaks) and active restoration activities (planting of native, fire-resilient plant species) that are included in the project as originally authorized for funding. The expanded project activities and locations, including the three new project sites, are within the scope of the CWPP PEIR. The City will comply with the applicable CWPP PEIR mitigation measures for all project work.

Further, the CWPP has not changed since the February 2, 2023 authorization. There have been no changed circumstances or new information that triggers the requirement for additional documentation under CEQA. Therefore, no further review pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act is required.

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