

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
November 21, 2024

MOONSTONE BEACH COASTAL RESILIENCE AND PUBLIC ACCESS PLANNING PROJECT

Project No. 24-051-01
Project Manager: Peter Jarausch

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Consideration to disburse up to \$750,000 to the Trinidad Coastal Land Trust for the Moonstone Beach Coastal Resilience and Public Access Planning Project, which consists of conducting studies and community engagement, identifying and evaluating alternatives, and preparing designs and draft environmental review documents for public access improvements that will alleviate crowding and improve accessibility and climate resilience at Moonstone Beach in Humboldt County.

LOCATION: Moonstone Beach, Humboldt County.

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)
- Exhibit 2: [Project Photos](#)
- Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)

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 seven hundred fifty thousand dollars (\$750,000) to the Trinidad Coastal Land Trust (“the grantee”) for the Moonstone Beach Coastal Resilience and Public Access Planning Project, which consists of conducting studies and community engagement, identifying and evaluating alternatives, and preparing designs and draft environmental review documents for public access improvements to alleviate crowding and improve accessibility and climate resilience at Moonstone Beach in Humboldt County (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:

1. A detailed work program, schedule, and budget.
2. Names and qualifications of any contractors to be retained in carrying out the project.
3. In addition, to the extent appropriate, the grantee 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 coastal accessways.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.
3. The Trinidad Coastal Land Trust is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the State Coastal Conservancy authorize a grant of up to \$750,000 to the Trinidad Coastal Land Trust (TCLT) for the Moonstone Beach Coastal Resilience and Public Access Planning Project. Moonstone Beach is a scenic and highly popular coastal access location in Humboldt County (see Exhibit 1 Project Location) where the public access infrastructure is eroding due to the increasing frequency and intensity of winter storms. The Moonstone Beach Coastal Resilience and Public Access Planning Project, which is referred to as the "project" in this staff recommendation, consists of conducting studies and community engagement, identifying and evaluating alternatives, and preparing designs and draft environmental review documents for public access improvements that will alleviate crowding and improve accessibility and climate resilience so that the public can continue to enjoy this location for many years into the future.

The public has been enjoying Moonstone Beach for more than 50 years. It has long been a popular beginner surf spot and, during the summer months, dog walkers, families, and visitors enjoy the wide-open beach and views of the dramatic offshore rocks. This summer was the 24th year for the Moonstone Beach Surf Camp which introduces youth ages 8 and up to surfing, body boarding, and Junior Lifesaving. Even during the winter months when the beach is slightly narrower, and the water a bit colder, surfers are out and people stop by to enjoy the sunset.

While always a popular location, the number of visitors increased dramatically during the pandemic as it did in many other parks. Visitation has decreased slightly since, but it is still much higher than it was prior to the pandemic and there is not enough parking for everyone who drives to the beach. When the small parking area is full, visitors use a narrow access road as overflow parking making it very difficult for emergency services to access the beach because

the road becomes too narrow. This also limits access to a nearby restaurant that shares the access road.

Coastal access is provided by the TCLT, who owns a public access easement over a portion of the approximately half-acre parking lot adjacent to the beach, and the County of Humboldt who owns the access road. When TCLT acquired the easement from a private landowner in 1979 the parking area was approximately 1/3 larger than it is today due to erosion. The parking lot is shared with the "Beach House," a small venue for weddings and other events, owned by the private landowner. The current landowner is highly supportive of public access. Initially, the lot could easily accommodate parking for public beachgoers as well as Beach House guests. Over many years, the parking lot has slowly eroded and the number of spots available to the public has decreased. During winter storms it is common for waves to reach the gravel parking lot, leaving behind driftwood and other storm debris. As the number of storms and their intensity is predicted to increase, the parking lot will start to shrink more rapidly.

The project will address the challenges at Moonstone Beach by developing plans for improving public access while making the area more resilient to climate change. TCLT will work with a consultant to conduct the necessary studies to determine the life expectancy of the parking lot considering the increasing rate of erosion due to sea level rise and increasing storm intensity and frequency. The project will also examine the possibility of a living shoreline approach to protect the parking lot from high waves that are common during winter storms. Since it may not be possible to protect the parking lot over the long term, even with a living shoreline, due to the rate of erosion and concerns over shoreline hardening, the project will also consider managed retreat. The project will evaluate whether it is possible to create new parking up the hill with a new trail to the beach. The project will include conducting hydrologic analysis including wave runup, geotechnical investigation, and biological and cultural surveys. The goal of the project is to complete 30% designs with an accompanying basis of design report, and a draft CEQA document.

The project also presents an opportunity to improve accessibility to the beach. The current parking lot elevation is only a few feet above the beach, which makes improving access easier to design and construct. Moonstone is also one of the few beaches where it is possible to drive right up to the edge of the beach without having to travel through dunes to get there.

Therefore, the project will evaluate whether it is possible to construct a ramp or other improvements that would allow visitors with a wider range of abilities to access the beach.

Public outreach and participation will also be a key aspect of the project and TCLT will incorporate robust public outreach. The general public is passionate about what takes place at Moonstone Beach and will be involved through public meetings and targeted outreach. Little River, which forms the southern edge of Moonstone Beach, is the boundary between the Yurok and Miwok ancestral territories. As part of the project, TCLT will reach out to tribal governments and non-profit organizations who have members of Yurok and/or Miwok descent to directly incorporate their perspectives into the planning process. In addition, the project will convene a technical advisory committee to provide review and input on project design.

Site Description:

Moonstone Beach has long been a popular spot for locals and visitors alike with its wide sandy beach, proximity to Little River, scenic rock formations and off-shore sea-stacks. The area attracts walkers, surfers, rock climbers, families, and tourists with its relatively easy access to the beach. It is located just south of the City of Trinidad in Humboldt County and just a short drive away from the larger communities of McKinleyville and Arcata. It is also frequently visited by out-of-town surfers.

The County of Humboldt owns the main access road and most of the beach north of the Little River. It also maintains a portable toilet and has spots for a few vehicles to park. TCLT owns an easement over a portion of the approximately half acre parking lot facing the beach. Some of its easement now extends over the beach because the parking lot has eroded. The private landowner operates a small venue adjacent to the parking lot and leases out a restaurant that is located approximately 50 feet higher in elevation up on the next marine terrace. To the southeast of the beach and along the northern edge of the Little River, TCLT owns a larger parcel that it acquired with assistance from the Conservancy. To the south of the Little River is Little River State Beach which is managed by State Parks. In the summer when the flow of water from Little River is more manageable, horseback riders and beachgoers ford the stream to Moonstone Beach from the State Park.

Grant Applicant Qualifications:

TCLT is a non-profit organization formed in 1978 to protect land and provide public access in and around the community of Trinidad. TCLT manages access to several very popular beach and surfing locations including Houda Point and Moonstone Beach. It has also cooperated with the Conservancy and the Coastal Commission to accept public access easements and construct public access improvements. It has been actively involved in the design of the California Coastal Trail over the Little River and it has recently acquired property from the California Department of Fish and Wildlife and constructed improvements on that property with support from the Wildlife Conservation Board. As a largely volunteer organization, TCLT is a direct expression of the local community's long-term dedication to conservation and public access; TCLT will draw from that support while leading the effort to create resilient public access at Moonstone Beach.

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 as it contributes to the State's objectives of providing access to the coast and improving resilience to climate change. The project will

develop plans and designs that will help preserve this important coastal access point. If this work is not undertaken the public will slowly lose access to the site as the parking area will continue to erode. The proposed project has a reasonable budget covering planning and initial design and environmental review.

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 planning phase will directly involve tribes in the project. TCLT will reach out directly to tribes and non-profit organizations with members of Yurok and Miwok ancestry. The Little River forms the approximate boundary between the Yurok and Miwok ancestral territories and is therefore potentially significant to both. The goal is to have input on the project early so the tribes can have a direct impact on the design of the project before environmental review is started.

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

This project is being undertaken to make a popular coastal access point more resilient to climate change. The main access to the beach is eroding and closed during winter storms. The project will evaluate the feasibility of using nature-based solutions to protect access in its current location. If that is not feasible the project partners will establish a plan for how and when to relocate the main parking area to an elevation that will be largely immune to impacts from climate change.

5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

The project will plan for improvements that will directly benefit the public. It will design accessibility improvements to increase access to the beach for visitors with a wide range of abilities. It will also increase the amount of parking available and structure the parking so that it is still safe for visitors to get to the beach.

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

The proposed project involves meaningful community engagement. The planning phase of the project will focus directly on community outreach and involvement of the local tribes. TCLT is a well-regarded community partner that has an active program to train local residents and Cal Poly Humboldt students as docents who lead hikes on TCLT properties. The public is well aware of the lack of parking at Moonstone Beach and supportive of the upcoming planning effort to improve access.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$750,000
Project Total	\$750,000

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 and

coastal resilience needs using nature-based solutions or other strategies” (Budget Act 2022, SB 154 as amended by Budget Act of 2023, SB 101). The proposed project is consistent with this funding source because it will conduct coastal resilience planning for a popular recreational site adjacent to the California Coastal Trail for sea level rise adaptation needs and will evaluate how best to use nature-based designs for future climate resilience.

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. Through the proposed project, the Conservancy will help enhance a coastal accessway and thereby further access to and enjoyment of coastal resources in Humboldt County.

Section 31400.1 allows the Conservancy to award grants to a non-profit organization for development of accessways to and along the coast that serve more than local public needs. The proposed project will design coastal access improvements at Moonstone Beach, a very popular coastal access point that serves locals and visitors from throughout the State.

Section 31400.2 requires the Conservancy to consider a number of factors in determining the amount of funds to provide for the initial development of a public accessway. Consistent with this section, the proposed level of funding was evaluated relative to the total amount of funding available to the Conservancy for coastal access projects, the fiscal resources of the applicant, and the Conservancy’s project selection criteria (see Consistency with Conservancy’s Project Selection Criteria & Guidelines).

Section 31400.3 authorizes the Conservancy to assist nonprofit organizations in developing and implementing a system of public accessways to and along the state's coastline. The project will aid in establishing a system of public coastal accessways by redesigning parking and trails and other associated improvements in a heavily visited coastal accessway, which will protect and increase public access.

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

Consistent with **Goal 2.3 Expand Accessibility**, the proposed project will develop designs to improve accessibility to the beach.

Consistent with **Goal 2.5 Recreation Facilities and Amenities**, the proposed project will prepare plans and designs to enhance a recreational facility.

Consistent with **Goal 4.1 Sea Level Rise Adaptation Projects**, the proposed project will prepare plans and designs for nature-based solutions, strategies, and actions to increase coastal

resiliency through protection of public access infrastructure at a highly vulnerable coastal recreational site.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The proposed project is statutorily exempt from review under CEQA pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15262, which exempts planning and feasibility studies for possible future actions that have not yet been approved, adopted, or funded; and categorically exempt under Section 15306, which exempts data collection and resource evaluation activities that do not result in a serious or major disturbance to and environmental resource.

The proposed project consists of planning for how best to protect public parking and increase coastal access, as well as drafting an environmental review document. Thus, the proposed project involves only data gathering, resource evaluation, planning, and feasibility analysis for possible future actions that have not yet been approved or funded. Consistent with Section 15262, the project will consider environmental factors. Consistent with Section 15306, the data collections and resource evaluation components of the project will not cause major or serious disturbance to the environment.

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