

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
November 21, 2024

**UPPER GREAT HIGHWAY, LINCOLN WAY TO SLOAT BLVD., CLIMATE RESILIENCE PROJECT**

Project No. 24-048-01  
Project Manager: Erica Johnson

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$1,000,000 to San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department to implement the Upper Great Highway Climate Resilience Project, consisting of conducting technical studies and community engagement, and preparing conceptual alternatives to prepare Upper Great Highway, from Lincoln Way to Sloat Boulevard, for climate change impacts in the City and County of San Francisco.

**LOCATION:** Upper Great Highway from Lincoln Way to Sloat Blvd., City and County of San Francisco

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EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)
- Exhibit 2: [Project Photos](#)
- Exhibit 3: [Executive Summary, Growing Resilience: Recommendations for Dune Management at North Ocean Beach 2023](#)
- 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 one million dollars (\$1,000,000) to San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department (“the grantee”) to implement the Upper Great Highway Climate Resilience Project, consisting of conducting technical studies and community engagement, and preparing conceptual alternatives to prepare Upper Great Highway, from Lincoln Way to Sloat Boulevard, for climate change impacts 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:

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

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:

3. The proposed authorization is consistent with Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding San Francisco Bay Program.
4. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.

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## **STAFF RECOMMENDATION**

### **PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a \$1,000,000 grant to San Francisco Recreation and Parks Department (SFRPD) for Upper Great Highway Climate Resilience Project. The project consists of conducting technical studies and community engagement, and preparing conceptual alternatives to prepare Upper Great Highway, from Lincoln Way to Sloat Boulevard, for climate change impacts in the City and County of San Francisco (Exhibit 1).

The Upper Great Highway (the highway) is a two mile-long, 4-lane highway that runs parallel to the Pacific Ocean between Lincoln Way and Sloat Boulevard in San Francisco (Exhibit 1, figure 2). Adjacent to the highway is a Coastal Trail segment that has a separated bike and pedestrian trail. West of the highway are coastal dunes habitat, sandy beach, and multiple access points to Ocean Beach through the dunes (Exhibit 2, Figure 1). The highway has had ongoing issues with sand erosion from the adjacent beach and dunes. The erosion is caused by high winds and storms but exacerbated by human-made foot trails that trample dune plants. When the sand travels landward, it accumulates in such large quantities on the highway that it can prevent vehicular transportation and recreation, cause damage to the traffic lights, and clog the city's combined stormwater and sewer system (Exhibit 2, Figure 2). The highway is closed up to 37 days per year due to sand accumulation, and recreation amenities (trails, parking lots, beach access) are often obstructed for several weeks each spring, temporarily eliminating accessibility to people with disabilities and bikes.

Climate change impacts such as increased frequency of storms and sea level rise, are anticipated to increase the number of days per year the highway is closed and cause other issues. The 2012 Ocean Beach Master Plan predicts the area to be impacted by coastal flooding due to sea level rise and stormwater inundation by year 2070. The San Francisco Planning

Department's Sea Level Rise Vulnerability and Consequences Assessment of 2020 predicts that 5.5 feet of sea level rise would inundate the beach and segments of the Coastal Trail. Both plans call for planning and preparation of the project area for climate change impacts.

In recent years, the project area showed potential for other uses that would allow for greater recreation, ecological, and climate adaptation benefits. During the COVID 19 Pandemic, the highway was closed to vehicles to improve public access to recreation (Exhibit 2, Figures 3-6). The closure allowed people to use the highway to walk, skate, and bike. The roads were re-opened to vehicular transportation when shelter-in-place orders were lifted; however, the San Francisco Board of Supervisors approved a 3-year pilot project in 2022 to close the roads to vehicular access on the weekends to allow for recreation on the highway. In November 2024, the residents of San Francisco will vote on whether to close the highway permanently to vehicular transportation. Other options to full closure include reducing the number of lanes that are open or to make permanent the pilot where the highway is only closed to traffic on the weekends (partial closure). Regardless of the outcome, SFRPD will need to implement the project, but pending the results of the November election, the specific focus on some of the project studies will be refined.

The project specific tasks are as follows:

5. Climate and Ecological studies – SFRPD will implement an updated sea level rise (SLR) study that will provide more up-to-date and specific SLR and storm scenarios to prepare the project area for than the previous assessments mentioned above. SFRPD will also assess opportunities to implement nature-based adaptation strategies to improve ecological conditions for wildlife and reduce climate change impacts.
6. Recreation study – SFRPD will conduct a gap analysis, informed by community engagement (see below) to identify recreation needs of communities near the highway. The study will consider options like the re-alignment of the Coastal Trail, access points to the beach that reduce trampling of dune plants, wind shielded recreation area behind the dunes, a multi-use promenade, and Americans with Disability Act (ADA) accessibility improvements.
7. Transportation study – The project team will collect transportation data and analyze transportation modes and patterns to better plan and support active transportation (e.g. biking) for the sustainable growth of the area. The analysis will include the exploration of alternative transportation routes in the event full or partial closure of the highway.
8. Community engagement - SFRPD will develop and implement a public participation plan that includes community meetings, online engagement, and on-site engagement. The project team will solicit input from up to 40 community and stakeholder groups, develop an informational story-map, aim to receive up to 5,000 online survey responses, and host three on-site walking tours. The community will inform alternative designs for future recreational, transportation, and ecological needs in the project area.

9. Conceptual alternatives – up to four conceptual design alternatives will be developed based on the findings from the studies and community engagement. Depending on the November 2024 ballot decision, the alternative designs will explore either full closure of the highway or partial closure. The public will have the opportunity to review and recommend the best conceptual alternatives for the project area. These concepts will be presented to key decision makers, including the Recreation and Parks Commission, the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency Board of Directors, and the San Francisco Board of Supervisors, for a decision in December of 2025 when the current partial closure pilot ends.

**Site Description:**

The project area consists of the four lane Upper Great Highway and the two recreational trails that run parallel to the highway between Lincoln Way and Sloat Blvd. One of the recreation trails runs alongside the dunes, and the other recreation trail is a paved path and runs between the highway and a residential street called Great Highway. The project area is about two miles in length and includes the sand dunes up to 50 feet from the Upper Great Highway. The project area is approximately 50 acres in size and is all under the jurisdiction of SFRPD. Ocean Beach is adjacent to the project area and is managed in part by SFRPD (up to fifty feet West of the Upper Great Highway), with the remaining area under the jurisdiction of the National Park Service (Exhibit 2, Figure 7). The project area and adjacent residential areas were historically all sand dunes.

The neighborhood adjacent to the project area is Outer Sunset, part of the Sunset District which is the most populated neighborhood in San Francisco. Ocean Beach is one of the main attractions in the area for recreation. According to the Sea Level Rise Vulnerabilities and Consequences Assessment (2020), Ocean Beach draws more than 300,000 visitors each year; however, the entire length of Ocean Beach is expected to be inundated by temporary coastal flooding. In addition, damage to trails, parking, and the highway itself will occur due to flooding and sand erosion.

In December of 2023, a collaborative effort led by San Francisco Estuary Institute (SFEI) and funded by the Conservancy called the Sunset Natural Resilience Project, engaged the National Park Service and various departments of the City and County of San Francisco in developing recommendations for sand management and public access improvements at North Ocean Beach. SFEI and key collaborators summarized findings and recommendations in the Growing Resilience: Recommendations for Dune Management at North Ocean Beach report (North Ocean Beach Report) (Exhibit 3). While the report recommends management strategies that could be implemented on Ocean Beach Recreation Area, some of those strategies are relevant to the proposed project because the dunes overlap the Ocean Beach Recreation Area and Upper Great Highway project area. The proposed project will incorporate the sand and ecological management recommendations from the report where applicable, along with any additional findings from the studies proposed in this project.

**Grant Applicant Qualifications:**

SFRPD manages 4,113 acres of recreational and open space, including 220 parks throughout the city and has also been the successful recipient of numerous Federal, State, local, and private fund awards. The Capital and Planning Division that will implement the project is comprised of over 28 staff with roles in project management, planning, finance, public outreach, and various support functions. The staff have a background in park planning and transportation analysis and are knowledgeable of the coastal erosion conditions of the Upper Great Highway. The agency also has professional service agreements with various consultants to assure biological, historical, and cultural resources are protected. In 2021, the same project team successfully delivered a planning project for JFK Drive, a roadway in Golden Gate Park, engaging over 10,000 San Franciscans in a robust community process that led to 3 miles of roadway converted to bicycle and pedestrian-only streets (promenade). SFRPD is supported by the San Francisco Municipal Transportation Agency (SFMTA) that specializes in transportation planning, engineering, traffic modeling, and street design. In addition, SFRPD, SFMTA, and the National Park Service have an established relationship with each other with respect to managing the dunes, the roadway, and parking lots where the agency boundary exists. The three agencies recently participated in the North Ocean Beach Report described above. Letters of support from the project partners are included as Exhibit 4.

**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 proposed project provides important benefits to the region by preparing the project area to mitigate climate change impacts, while improving recreation opportunities and native coastal habitat. The project advances the State's 30X30 Executive Order by conducting the studies and planning needed to enhance or restore degraded coastal dunes habitat (Strategy 6.1) and buffer infrastructure and recreational amenities from sea level rise (Strategy 6.2) using nature-based strategies. The proposed project also advances the following plans:

**Ocean Beach Master Plan (2012):** In preparation for climate change impacts (sea level rise and erosion) along Ocean Beach, the plan calls for reducing the lanes of the highway to facilitate managed retreat, implement dunes restoration, and install modular boardwalks to provide public access with minimal impacts (Ocean Beach Middle Reach, Key Move 3 and 4). The

proposed project will conduct the necessary studies and conceptual design to consider these recommendations.

**San Francisco General Plan, Western Shoreline Area Plan:** This is a section of a city-wide general plan and Objective 2 calls for the redesign of the Great Highway to enhance its scenic qualities and recreational use and Objective 6 which calls for maintenance and enhancement of recreational use of the Ocean Beach shoreline. The proposed project helps to improve access and recreation along the Great Highway and Ocean Beach while also improving the habitat and habitat connectivity for wildlife.

**San Francisco Sea Level Rise Assessment and Consequences (2020):** This assessment identifies the project area as being vulnerable to sea level rise and calls for alternative public access in anticipation for portions of the Coastal Trail to be inundated and calls for the implementation of the Ocean Beach Master Plan as a critical next step for sea level rise adaptation planning.

**SFEI’s Growing Resilience: Recommendations for Dune Management at North Ocean Beach (2023):** The proposed project will consider sustainable mitigation strategies and dune improvements described in the report, described briefly in the Project Description above.

In addition, the city has goals for increasing housing and population in the Sunset District. This project actively examines how Upper Great Highway can support additional recreational space and active transportation for the sustainable growth of the city.

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

The proposed project will develop conceptual alternative designs for the project area that anticipates future climate change and adaptation strategies as described in the Project Description section above. The project will combat loss of shoreline open space by assessing alternative recreation opportunities. SFPRD will develop design alternatives with community input using the best available science.

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

The proposed project will plan for sea level rise, increased stormwater run-off, and increased erosion of the adjacent beach and dunes. In the long term, climate change impacts will reduce the area’s ability to support transportation and recreation, damage key city infrastructure (roads, traffic lights, stormwater and sewage drainage), and reduce coastal habitat. For these reasons, the project will conduct the technical studies and community engagement as described in the “Project Description” section above to help prepare for and mitigate those impacts. In addition, SFRPD will incorporate the recommendations, planting palette, and design guidance developed by SFEI via the Sunset Natural Resilience project that is a coordinated effort to improve wildlife habitat and connectivity along the Western shoreline.

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

In November 2024 the residents of San Francisco will vote to decide whether the Upper Great Highway will be closed permanently to vehicular traffic or not. The outcome of the vote will

determine the design scenarios that SFRPD will consider to address climate adaptation, ecological restoration or enhancement, and recreation needs and improvements. The proposed project will implement community engagement to inform the development of the conceptual designs for recreation, transportation (vehicular and alternative transportation), and climate adaptation described in the “Project Description” section above. Project letters are included in Exhibit 4.

**PROJECT FINANCING**

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b>	<b>\$1,000,000</b>
San Francisco General Fund - Transportation	\$120,000
SFRPD General Fund	\$120,000
<b>Project Total</b>	<b>\$1,240,000</b>

Conservancy funding is anticipated to come from Fiscal Year 2023/24 appropriation of General Fund to the Conservancy for the purposes of “urgent sea level rise adaptation and coastal resilience needs using nature-based strategies and other solutions” (Budget Act 2023, Chapter 12 of Statutes of 2023 (SB 101) as amended by Chapter 38, Statutes of 2023 (AB102)). The proposed project will meet this objective because it will conduct studies and develop conceptual designs to restore and protect coastal dunes habitat in order to mitigate erosion and coastal flooding caused by sea level rise.

The San Francisco City and County will provide \$120,000 to this project from its General Fund designated to transportation projects. SFRPD will contribute \$120,000 to this project from its General Fund.

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 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, Sections 31162 et seq. regarding the San Francisco Bay Area Program, which authorizes the Conservancy to undertake projects and award grants in the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area that will help achieve the goals of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program.

Section 31162(a) authorizes the Conservancy to award grants for 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 through completion of regional and local trail systems and through the provision of related facilities, such as picnic areas and staging areas. The proposed project will conduct studies and planning to improve

public access to the coast along a highly urbanized portion of the coast while also improving coastal dunes habitat for wildlife.

Section 31162(b) authorizes the Conservancy to award grants for 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 help plan a project to enhance and restore coastal dunes habitat for the benefit of wildlife and to mitigate increased erosion and coastal flooding anticipated due to climate change.

Section 31162(d) authorizes the Conservancy to award grants for projects that promote, assist, and enhance open space and natural areas that are accessible to urban populations for recreational and educational purposes. The proposed project will incorporate additional public recreation amenities to improve public access to the project adjacent Ocean Beach and mitigate sand erosion that causes recreational trails, beach access points, and the highway to close temporarily.

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

Consistent with **Goal 2.5, Recreation Facilities and Amenities**, the proposed project will conduct the initial planning required to improve public access amenities by utilizing nature-based strategies to reduce sand erosion and road closures and explore alternative modes of transportation that could be supported in the project area.

Consistent with **Goal 3.2, Restore and Enhance Habitat**, the proposed project will conduct the initial planning required to enhance and/or restore coastal dunes habitat to improve the safety and connectivity of urban wildlife, improve habitat, and reduce erosion.

Consistent with **Goal 4.1, Sea Level Rise Adaptation**, the proposed project will conduct the initial planning required to adapt public infrastructure, public access infrastructure, and use nature-based strategies to mitigate potential impacts from coastal flooding and erosion.

**CEQA COMPLIANCE:**

The proposed project is categorically exempt from CEQA under 14 Cal. Code Regulation Section 15306 for information collection because it consists of basic data collection and resource evaluation activities that will not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource. The proposed project is a part of a study leading to an action which a public agency has not yet approved, adopted, or funded. The project is also statutorily exempt under 14 Cal. Code Regulation Section 15262 in that the proposed project will prepare conceptual plans for future actions that have not yet been approved, adopted, or funded.

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