

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
April 17, 2025

**CHUMASH CULTURAL PROJECT AT AMBASSADOR PARK PLANNING**

Project No. 18-012-02  
Project Manager: Irvin Tang

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$240,000 to the City of Santa Barbara to engage Tribes and other stakeholders; conduct technical studies; prepare permit applications; and advance the designs to redevelop Ambassador Park in Santa Barbara, including through native landscaping and cultural components that celebrate the cultural heritage of the Chumash native people.

**LOCATION:** City of Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara County

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EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)
- Exhibit 2: [Site Photos](#)
- Exhibit 3: [Conceptual Design Plans](#)
- 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 two hundred forty thousand dollars (\$240,000) to City of Santa Barbara (“the grantee”) to engage Tribes and other stakeholders; conduct technical studies; prepare permit applications; and advance the designs to redevelop Ambassador Park in Santa Barbara, including through native landscaping and cultural components that celebrate the cultural heritage of the Chumash native people (“the project”).

This authorization is subject to the following condition:

To the extent appropriate, the City of Santa Barbara shall incorporate the guidelines of the Conservancy’s ‘Coastal Access Project Standards’.

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 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding 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 the Conservancy authorize a disbursement of up to \$240,000 to the City of Santa Barbara to engage Tribes and other stakeholders; conduct technical studies; prepare permit applications; and advance the designs to redevelop Ambassador Park in Santa Barbara, including through native landscaping and cultural components that celebrate the cultural heritage of the Chumash native people (“the project”). The project will also present the proposed renaming of “Ambassador Park” to “Syuxtun Park” to the city council.

Ambassador Park is located along the City of Santa Barbara’s waterfront at what was one of the largest Chumash settlements along the coast, Syuxtun Village. Consistent with the tragic history of California Indians, including state-sanctioned genocide, the Chumash lost people, access to ancestral land, and freedom to conduct cultural practices. Despite this history, descendants of the Chumash people persist in Santa Barbara County today and have been rebuilding their culture and community.

The Chumash community identified the proposed project as a priority. Currently, Ambassador Park is a grassy lawn bordered by palm trees with no amenities and is used primarily as a pass-through to the waterfront. The Chumash community proposed redeveloping Ambassador Park into a welcoming park that celebrates Chumash heritage and their presence in Santa Barbara today. A conceptual design for the project, funded by the Conservancy, was completed in 2024 with robust tribal engagement. The conceptual design (Exhibit 3) includes two paths that weave through the park, a gathering circle, a natural boulder sitting area, interpretive panels to share past and present-day stories of the Chumash native people, and small areas of native plantings for landscaping. The path layout expresses the meaning behind the name Syuxtun Village, which is “two trails that cross, diverge or converge.” The design highlights Chumash cultural heritage and provides a gathering circle for Chumash members to practice cultural ceremonies and events.

The proposed project will conduct technical studies, including biological, hydrological, and cultural resource surveys to advance conceptual designs; prepare permit applications; and confirm whether the Project is exempt under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). If the City of Santa Barbara confirms that the Project is exempt, the designs will likely be completed to 60%. The proposed project will continue to actively engage the Chumash community; engage other stakeholders through on-site workshops, social media, and other mediums; and present the proposed renaming of “Ambassador Park” to “Syuxtun Park” to the city council.

**Site Description:** Ambassador Park is located along the Santa Barbara waterfront adjacent to West Beach. The 0.53-acre park owned by the City of Santa Barbara is an open grassy lawn with palm trees and no amenities and is used primarily to pass-through to the waterfront. The small park is bordered by two public roads (W. Cabrillo Blvd. and W. Mason St.), a hotel, and an apartment building. This site was once part of the largest Chumash village on the west coast, Syuxtun Village. The village was recorded in 1542 by the Cabrillo expedition and again in 1769 by the Portolá expedition, which noted over 600 people living there. The Santa Barbara Mission was founded in 1786 and by the early 1830s the village had disappeared. The site has yielded some of the most important archeological evidence found in California—over 2,500 objects were uncovered in 1923 by archaeologist JP Harrington on behalf of the Smithsonian Institute. The Syuxtun Story Circle, a large 20-foot-wide Chumash mosaic, is embedded in the sidewalk directly across from Ambassador Park on the oceanfront walkway of West Beach. The mosaic was installed in 2009 in collaboration with Chumash groups and the City of Santa Barbara to tell the story of the Chumash people.

The Burton’s Mound, California Historical Landmark No. 306, is located at the park today and named after Don Luis Burton, who acquired the property in 1860. After Burton’s ownership, before it was gifted to the City of Santa Barbara in 1924, the site was the pedestrian paseo for the famous Potter/Ambassador Hotel built in 1903. The palm trees bordering the park were planted when the hotel was constructed in 1903.

**Grant Applicant Qualifications:** The City of Santa Barbara’s Parks and Recreation Department has extensive experience developing and renovating parks, as well as managing projects and grants. Successful recent park improvement projects include renovation of the Cabrillo Pavilion, MacKenzie Off-leash Dog Park, Kids World playground, Cabrillo Ball Park, and the construction of the new playground at the Municipal Tennis Center. Over the last two decades, the Conservancy funded the City’s Parks and Recreation Department on the Arroyo Burro Estuary Restoration, Arroyo Burro Watershed Palermo Acquisition, Mesa Lane Beach Access Steps, Andrée Clark Bird Refuge, and Beach Wheelchair Grant Program Projects.

**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 2023-2027 Strategic Plan” section below.

### **2. Project is a good investment of state resources.**

This project has regional significance by creating a free public gathering area and accessway to the coast that provides educational and cultural experiences of Chumash native peoples. The Santa Barbara waterfront is a popular regional and global tourist destination, and, as such, the project will serve a greater than local need. This project is consistent with the California Natural Resources Agency’s initiative “Outdoors for All” strategy to create outdoor spaces that reflect and celebrate the diversity and vibrancy of California’s many communities, cultures, and histories.

### **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 was identified by the Chumash community as a priority for the Conservancy to fund. The proposed project builds on six years of dialogue, evaluation, and consultation with approximately 25 Chumash stakeholders during past phases of the project. Chumash community members will continue to be engaged to review and refine design details, site materials, interpretative panel content, planting pallets, and use of Chumash symbols and cultural elements, which will be incorporated into the proposed park plans. Best management practices will be incorporated into the construction plans to protect archaeological and cultural resources.

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

The conceptual design for the project includes replacing the large turf space with decomposed granite paths, low maintenance native plants, and natural stone features that will stand against wear and tear. In addition, the design includes embedding interpretive materials in hardscapes and sign structures and encapsulating the site with imported fill to raise the grade to avoid sensitive archeological areas. The City of Santa Barbara will manage the regular maintenance of the redesigned park.

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

The project will provide multiple benefits, including enabling redevelopment of a coastal park to educate the public about natural and cultural resources significant to Chumash native people’s past and present-day life; creation of a gathering site for Chumash community members; and enhancement of public access to Santa Barbara’s waterfront.

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

The project includes significant tribal engagement (see Project Selection Criteria 3, above). Broader community engagement will be conducted through on-site workshops; social media communication with Santa Barbara residents and representatives of non-profit organizations

involved in Chumash cultural heritage and native habitat enhancements, including the Santa Barbara Natural History Museum and the Santa Barbara Botanic Garden; and other mediums.

**PROJECT FINANCING**

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b>	<b>\$240,000</b>
<b>Project Total</b>	<b>\$240,000</b>

The Conservancy funds for the project are expected to come from the California Drought, Water, Parks, Climate, Coastal Protection, and Outdoors Access for All Act of 2018 (“Proposition 68”), codified at Public Resource Code Sections 8000-80173. Chapter 9 of Proposition 68 allows funding for the “protection of beaches, bays, wetlands, and coastal watershed resources” in accordance with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Section 80120(c)). The definition of “protection” includes “actions to improve access to public open-space areas” as well as preservation and interpretation (Section 80002(l)). The proposed project is an eligible project, pursuant to Section 80120(c), because the project will design plans to enhance public access at Ambassador Park, an open grassy park used as a pass-through to the Santa Barbara waterfront, through new paths and native plantings; and provide interpretive elements to educate the public on past and present-day stories of the Chumash native people and their connection to the project site. In addition, the proposed project is consistent with the funding guidelines for expenditure of Proposition 68 adopted by the Conservancy on December 6, 2018 as described in various sections of this staff recommendation.

The City, through its Parks and Recreation Department, is contributing an estimated \$37,500 in-kind for staff oversight and management of the project. 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 undertaken pursuant to Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31400 - 31410). Section 31400 provides that it is the intent of the Legislature for the Conservancy to have a principal role in the implementation of a system of public coastal accessways. To carry out this mandate, the Conservancy is authorized under Section 31400.1 to provide grants to public entities to develop, operate, or manage lands for public access to and along the coast. Section 31400.1 restricts the Conservancy from providing grants to local agencies for accessways that only serve local public needs. This project is consistent with this section because it will plan for improvements that will enhance public access at a coastal park on the popular Santa Barbara waterfront visited by local, regional, and global visitors and facilitate enjoyment of coastal resources, including cultural resources. Section 31400.3 authorizes the Conservancy to assist public agencies in establishing a system of public coastal accessways and necessary related functions. The project is consistent with this

section because it is a grant to the City of Santa Barbara to plan interpretive elements that will educate the public on the history, culture, and lifestyle of the historically excluded Chumash people, furthering inclusive public access.

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

Consistent with **Goal 1.1 Benefit Excluded Communities**, the proposed project will elevate voices from a systematically excluded community through designing interpretive elements to share past and present-day stories of the Chumash native people.

Consistent with **1.2 Return Power to Tribes**, the proposed project will provide a coastal space for Chumash people to connect with their culture and gather for ceremonies, storytelling, and educational events.

Consistent with **2.2 Coastal Stories**, the proposed project will design interpretive signs and panels that document the history, culture, and lifestyle of the historically excluded Chumash people.

Consistent with **2.5 Recreation Facilities and Amenities**, the proposed project will design a turf space with decomposed granite paths, low maintenance native plants, and Chumash cultural elements. This project, which includes interpretive elements, will enable people to learn about natural, cultural, and historical resources significant to Chumash native people's past and present and enhance public access to the area.

**CEQA COMPLIANCE:**

The project is statutorily exempt from review under CEQA, pursuant to Section 15262 of Title 14 of the California Code of Regulations (CCR), which exempts planning and feasibility studies for possible future actions that have not yet been approved, adopted, or funded; and categorically exempt from review under CEQA, pursuant to 15306 of Title 14 of the CCR, which exempts basic data collection, research, experimental management, and resource evaluation activities that do not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource. The project consists of engaging Tribes and other stakeholders to inform designs; conducting technical studies; furthering designs; conducting environmental review, as needed; preparing permit applications; and presenting the renaming of a park to a city council. Thus, the project involves planning and feasibility studies for possible future actions that have not yet been approved or funded and basic data collection, research, and/or resource evaluation activities. Consistent with Sections 15262 and 15306, the project will consider environmental factors and not include activities that will result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource.

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