

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

February 19, 2026

ESPLANADE PARK COASTAL ACCESS ENHANCEMENT AND ADAPTATION PLAN

Project No. 25-052-01

Project Manager: Lexi Morrison

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$275,000 to the City of Capitola to undertake the Esplanade Park Coastal Access Enhancement and Adaptation Plan, consisting of planning and conceptual design for climate-resilient improvements at Esplanade Park in Santa Cruz County.

LOCATION: Esplanade Park, Capitola, Santa Cruz 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 two hundred seventy-five thousand dollars (\$275,000) to the City of Capitola (the “grantee”) to undertake the Esplanade Park Coastal Access Enhancement and Adaptation Plan, consisting of planning and conceptual design for climate-resilient improvements at Esplanade Park in Santa Cruz 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.

Notwithstanding the foregoing, this Conservancy resolution is effective only if legislation is enacted that exempts program guidelines and selection criteria for the disbursement of funds from the Safe Drinking Water, Wildfire Prevention, Drought Preparedness, and Clean Air Bond Act of 2024 (“Proposition 4”), Public Resources Code Sections 90000-95015, from the requirements of the Administrative Procedure Act at Government Code sections 11340-11361.

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 a \$275,000 grant to the City of Capitola (the City) to prepare the Esplanade Park Coastal Access Enhancement and Adaptation Plan, consisting of planning and conceptual design for climate-resilient improvements at Esplanade Park (the park) in Santa Cruz County (the project). The project will include evaluation of sea-level-rise related vulnerabilities and development of a climate-resilient coastal access and adaptation plan for the park, located along the Capitola waterfront in Santa Cruz County, as shown in Exhibit 1.

The park is a heavily used 0.53-acre waterfront park that serves as Capitola Village’s primary coastal access point and community gathering space. The park has experienced repeated flooding, wave overtopping, and storm damage, including significant debris deposition during the January 2023 atmospheric river events, and is increasingly at risk from sea level rise and storm surge. Without proactive planning, these hazards threaten the park’s recreational use, public access infrastructure, and the economic vitality of the surrounding village.

The project is the appropriate next step to address these vulnerabilities. The project will assess coastal hazards; model future sea level rise, drainage, and stormwater conditions; and develop multiple adaptation alternatives, including nature-based, hybrid, structural, and potential retreat strategies. Through this process, the City will refine one preferred adaptation and access plan to a preliminary design level, positioning the City to advance to environmental review, permitting, and future implementation. The project will provide the technical, design, and community input foundation necessary for a long-term, climate-resilient approach to maintaining coastal access at the park.

The project will include community engagement, including public workshops, surveys, and outreach at local events to reach residents, visitors, and Capitola Village businesses who rely on the park for recreation, coastal access, and community events. This engagement will ensure that adaptation strategies reflect community priorities and perspectives.

The project will fund planning tasks, including technical studies, development, and evaluation of conceptual design alternatives; refinement of a preferred adaptation plan; and preparation of a regulatory and California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pathway analysis. These tasks represent the first phase of a broader effort by the City to implement long-term shoreline resilience improvements along the Esplanade and Capitola waterfront.

Site Description: The park is a 0.53-acre waterfront park owned by the City and located in the heart of Capitola Village along the Monterey Bay shoreline. The park serves as a central public gathering space and coastal access point, featuring open lawn areas, benches, a bandstand used for concerts and community events, and pedestrian walkways that connect directly to Capitola Beach. The site also includes shoreline-adjacent hardscape used for seating, circulation, and beach access, and provides views and recreation opportunities that draw both local residents and regional visitors.

The park sits immediately landward of the beach and is directly exposed to coastal hazards, including wave overtopping, tidal flooding, and storm surge. These hazards were most recently demonstrated during the January 2023 atmospheric river events, when the park experienced extensive flooding and deposition of large woody debris. While the park provides limited natural habitat due to its developed condition, its shoreline position offers opportunities to integrate nature-based coastal resilience strategies as part of future improvements.

Surrounding land uses include commercial businesses, restaurants, and shops that comprise Capitola Village, as well as public parking areas that provide regional access to the waterfront. The location's popularity for tourism, recreation, and community events creates high demand for safe and reliable coastal access, while the dense urban setting constrains shoreline adaptation options and heightens the importance of long-term planning. The project area includes four contiguous City-owned parcels, and the City has full site control for all proposed planning activities.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: The City is well qualified to carry out the project and to manage the resulting long-term adaptation and coastal access improvements at the park. The City has demonstrated capacity to successfully administer state-funded coastal resilience projects, including the Conservancy-supported Wharf Resiliency Project, which advanced from technical studies through design, permitting, and construction.

The City has qualified staff within its Public Works Department responsible for project oversight, grant administration, and coordination with consultants, as well as established procedures for financial management and reporting for state grants. The City will retain experienced coastal engineering, planning, and engagement consultants to prepare the technical studies, conceptual designs, and adaptation plan.

As the owner of the park, the City is responsible for its ongoing operation and maintenance and has committed to incorporating the plan's recommendations into its Capital Improvement Program. Routine park upkeep will remain funded through the municipal budget, and the City will pursue additional state and federal grants to advance implementation and long-term maintenance of adaptation measures. Collectively, these factors demonstrate the City's

readiness and capacity to manage both the proposed planning effort and the future stewardship of the site.

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 because it provides important public benefits and advances statewide coastal resilience goals. The park is one of Capitola's most heavily used coastal access points, supporting recreation, tourism, community events, and shoreline connectivity for residents and visitors. The park has been repeatedly impacted by flooding and storm surge, and developing a comprehensive adaptation plan is a necessary and cost-effective step toward protecting this valued public resource and ensuring continued safe coastal access.

The project is feasible, based on a clearly defined scope, an experienced applicant, and a reasonable budget that reflects recent comparable coastal resilience planning efforts. The City is contributing in-kind staff time and has a strong track record managing state-funded coastal projects. The work will advance statewide climate adaptation and sea level rise planning goals, consistent with the Ocean Protection Council's Sea-Level Rise Guidance and regional resilience priorities. By evaluating a range of nature-based, hybrid, and structural adaptation approaches, the project will also develop strategies that may inform adaptation planning for other small urban waterfront parks along the California coast.

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 has experience engaging tribes on prior coastal resilience projects and will apply the same approach for the park. Representatives of tribes that are traditionally and culturally affiliated with the area will be contacted early in the planning process and invited to participate in workshops and focused discussions. Engagement will center on incorporating tribal perspectives into the conceptual design process, including cultural resource protection, shoreline stewardship, and opportunities for culturally-informed interpretation or land acknowledgment within the park.

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

The project will produce long-lasting benefits by addressing the park's increasing exposure to sea level rise, storm surge, and tidal flooding. By developing adaptation strategies consistent

with state guidance and based on site-specific hazard modeling, the project will plan for improvements that increase the park's functionality and protective capacity as climate conditions change. The project's evaluation of nature-based, hybrid, structural, and potential retreat options will provide flexible pathways that can be adapted over time, ensuring that the City can respond to evolving coastal hazards without constraining future adaptation choices.

Because the plan will include preliminary design for a preferred alternative, cost estimates, and a permitting and CEQA pathway analysis, it will position the City to pursue implementation funding and advance the most resilient strategies into construction. This forward-planning approach ensures the project's benefits extend well beyond the duration of the grant by laying the groundwork for durable coastal access, safer public spaces, and long-term resilience for one of Capitola's most-used waterfront parks.

5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

The project will deliver multiple community and environmental benefits by developing a long-term plan to protect one of Capitola's most heavily used coastal access points from flooding and sea level rise. The park serves residents, visitors, and regional beach users, providing open space, recreational amenities, and community gathering areas. By planning for climate-resilient improvements, the project supports public health, recreation, and continued access to Monterey Bay while reducing future disruptions from coastal hazards.

The project will also increase community preparedness for climate change by engaging residents, local businesses, and park visitors in understanding site vulnerabilities and evaluating adaptation options. This inclusive process helps build local resilience and ensures that adaptation strategies reflect community priorities. In exploring nature-based shoreline elements, the project also has the potential to enhance ecological functions along an urban shoreline, providing environmental co-benefits while improving the park's long-term sustainability.

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

The project has been structured to include meaningful community engagement that reflects the priorities of residents, visitors, and Capitola Village businesses who rely on the park for recreation, coastal access, and community events. The City will conduct a series of public workshops at key milestones, hold pop-up outreach at park events, and offer an online bilingual survey to reach community members who may be unable to attend in person. Materials will be accessible through the City's website and shared through multiple communication channels to ensure broad participation.

The City has a demonstrated track record of incorporating community input into recent coastal adaptation efforts, and the project will continue that model by ensuring that the preferred adaptation and access plan reflects local knowledge, community priorities, and concerns about long-term shoreline resilience.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$275,000
Project Total	\$275,000

The anticipated source of Conservancy funding for this project is an appropriation of the Safe Drinking Water, Wildfire Prevention, Drought Preparedness, and Clean Air Bond Act of 2024, also known as the 2024 Climate Bond or Proposition 4 (Public Resources Code, Sections 90000 to 95015). These funds are available as described in Section 92015 of the Public Resource Code. The funds are available for “the purpose of coastal and combined flood management projects and activities for developed shoreline areas, including areas with critical community infrastructure, including, but not limited to, transportation and port infrastructure at risk of current flooding and flooding due to sea level rise.” The project is consistent with this funding source because it will develop a comprehensive plan to address sea level rise, coastal flooding, and storm surge impacts at the park, a heavily used public waterfront park that provides coastal access and a community gathering space.

The City of Capitola will provide \$50,000 in in-kind staff support to assist with project management, coordination, and oversight.

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 consistent with the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, specifically Chapter 3 (Sections 31111 and 31113).

Section 31111 authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to public agencies to prepare plans and feasibility studies that implement Division 21. The recommended authorization will enable the City to prepare a coastal access enhancement and adaptation plan for the park, including technical studies and conceptual designs necessary to guide future shoreline resilience improvements.

The project will be undertaken pursuant to Section 31113, which authorizes the Conservancy to undertake projects and award grants that address the impacts and potential impacts of climate change on resources within the Conservancy’s jurisdiction. Pursuant to Section 31113(b) and (c), the Conservancy may award grants to public agencies to undertake projects within its jurisdiction that address sea level rise, extreme weather events, flooding, storm surge, saltwater intrusion, and other coastal hazards that threaten coastal communities, infrastructure, and natural resources. Consistent with this authority, the project will assess vulnerability to sea level rise, storm surge, and tidal flooding and develop adaptation alternatives to protect the park and adjacent coastal access.

Pursuant to Section 31113(c) and (d), the Conservancy must prioritize projects that maximize public benefits, reduce flood risk, and utilize natural infrastructure where feasible while offering multiple benefits. The project meets these requirements by evaluating nature-based shoreline adaptation approaches, hybrid and structural strategies, and opportunities to enhance ecological functions along the urban waterfront while protecting a heavily used community park. The project will also incorporate community input to ensure that proposed solutions provide broad public benefits and support long-term coastal resilience.

Accordingly, the recommended authorization is consistent with Sections 31111 and 31113 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.

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

Consistent with **Goal 4.1, Sea Level Rise Adaptation Projects**, the project will prepare a comprehensive sea level rise and coastal hazard assessment for the park and evaluate a range of adaptation strategies that address increasing flooding, wave overtopping, and storm surge risks.

Consistent with **Goal 4.3, Multi-Benefit Nature-Based Climate Adaptation**, the project will develop and assess nature-based shoreline adaptation alternatives, such as dune enhancement, vegetated berms, and shoreline plantings, to mitigate climate impacts on park infrastructure while improving ecological functions along this urban waterfront.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The project is statutorily exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA), pursuant to Title 14 of the California Code of Regulations (CCR), Section 15262 (Feasibility and Planning Studies), which exempts planning and feasibility studies for possible future actions that have not yet been approved, adopted, or funded and that consider environmental factors. The project is consistent with this Section because the project includes planning and conceptual designs for possible, future climate-resilient improvements to the park that have not yet been approved, adopted, or funded and that consider environmental factors.

The project is also categorically exempt from review under CEQA, pursuant to Title 14 of the CCR, Section 15306 (Information Collection), which exempts basic data collection, research, and resource evaluation activities that will not result in disturbance to an environmental resource. The project is consistent with this Section because the project includes information collection to evaluate sea-level-rise related vulnerabilities to the park that do not result in serious or major disturbance to environmental resources.

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