COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
February 19, 2026

LOWER SYCAMORE CREEK FLOOD MITIGATION AND RESTORATION PLANNING PROJECT

Project No. 25-053-01
Project Manager: Rachel Couch

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to $2,015,000 to the City of Santa Barbara to undertake the Lower Sycamore Creek Flood Mitigation and Restoration Planning Project, consisting of completing technical studies; conducting public outreach; evaluating design alternatives; and preparing 30% overall project design, 60% channel restoration design, environmental compliance documents, and permit applications for restoration of lower Sycamore Creek in Santa Barbara County.

LOCATION: City of Santa Barbara, Santa Barbara County

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Project Location Map

Exhibit 2: Figures and 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 million fifteen thousand dollars ($2,015,000) to the City of Santa Barbara (the "grantee") to undertake the Lower Sycamore Creek Flood Mitigation and Restoration Planning Project, consisting of completing technical studies; conducting public outreach; evaluating design alternatives; and preparing 30% overall project design, 60% channel restoration design, environmental compliance documents, and permit applications for restoration of lower Sycamore Creek in Santa Barbara 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 (Section 31113) of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the impacts of climate change.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a $2,015,000 grant to the City of Santa Barbara (the "City") to undertake the Lower Sycamore Creek Flood Mitigation and Restoration Planning Project, consisting of completing technical studies; conducting public outreach; evaluating design alternatives; and preparing 30% overall project design, 60% channel restoration design, environmental compliance documents, and permit applications for restoration of lower Sycamore Creek in Santa Barbara County (the "project"). The project will develop plans to widen and restore the lower reach of Sycamore Creek (creek) south of Highway 101 to reduce flooding in a severely disadvantaged community north of Highway 101, improve habitat, increase flood conveyance capacities, and increase resilience to climate impacts. See Exhibit 1 for project location.

The project site and area immediately upstream have been subject to a significant number of damaging floods. Since 1862, fourteen separate floods of sufficient magnitude to cause extensive damage along Lower Sycamore Creek have occurred, with the worst documented flooding in the area taking place in 1969, 1971, 1995, and 1998. Among the areas impacted by these floods is a severely disadvantaged community. Many of the most damaging storm events were preceded by wildfires that burned the watershed and included substantial debris flows and deposition. Over 50% of Sycamore Creek's Watershed is within a High Fire Hazard Area (see Exhibit 2), making the watershed very vulnerable to fire, and posing a high risk of property damage and loss of life when fires are followed by a significant storm event.

The current channel capacities are constrained to less than a 10-year storm event. Furthermore, recent modeling conducted for the City shows that rainfall rates are significantly increasing in intensity due to rising atmospheric temperatures. It is projected that what was once the 100-year rainfall event such as that seen in February 1998 will be seven times more

likely to occur after 2030 and the 10-year rainfall event, such as was seen in January 2023, will be twice as likely to occur. Additionally, sea-level rise will exacerbate flood risks along lower Sycamore Creek due to tidal influence in the lower third of the project reach.

Widening and restoring habitat in lower Sycamore Creek channel will result in numerous benefits including: reduction in flood frequency, extents, and severity, including in a severely disadvantaged community; increased resilience to the impacts of sea-level rise and increased flooding from changes in rainfall patterns as a result of climate change; reduced need for habitat destroying bank hardening to protect existing development; improved habitat for endangered tidewater goby and southern steelhead, as well as other estuarine, riverine, and riparian species; and improved creek corridor aesthetics and public enjoyment in this highly visible location adjacent to play fields, a zoo, and coastal walking and bike paths heavily used by locals and tourists.

The project will undertake detailed modeling and design to inform evaluation of project alternatives. To facilitate channel widening and flood risk reduction, four existing bridges will need to be removed and redesigned. One of the bridges to be redesigned is the railroad bridge owned and managed by Union Pacific Railroad (UPRR). City staff have coordinated with UPRR staff and obtained written support for this application and project. The City will undertake the necessary technical studies including: modeling of hydrologic, hydraulic, fluvial/sediment transport; flood modeling including sea-level rise and increased rainfall intensities; and studies of biological and cultural resources, geotechnical conditions, and traffic and parking.

Following preparation of technical reports and a feasibility analysis, the City will prepare detailed conceptual (30%) design plans and a subsequent preliminary channel restoration design plan set (60% level). The City will also develop cost estimates. The City will conduct environmental review pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA). The anticipated level of CEQA review is a mitigated negative declaration. The project will include a robust public outreach process and agency consultations as part of the draft feasibility analysis and as part of CEQA review. Finally, the City will prepare applications for environmental permits for the chosen alternative. The project will result in a “shovel ready” project eligible for implementation funding for final designs and construction.

Site Description: The project site is a .25-mile section of Sycamore Creek located between Highway 101 and the ocean. This creek section is known as lower Sycamore Creek, and it includes the estuary of Sycamore Creek. The project site is within the City of Santa Barbara, and the City owns most of the site. Property owner agreements will be finalized once CEQA review is complete if needed. Given that the project would increase flood protection for neighboring properties, support and permission to complete the project is anticipated. UPRR owns one of the bridges that needs to be redesigned to greatly increase flow capacity. The City has been coordinating with UPRR on the project and has received a letter of support for the planning phase of the project.

Sycamore Creek is a subwatershed of the Santa Ynez Mountains, which run east-west overlooking the coastal plain and the Santa Barbara Channel Islands in southern Santa Barbara County. The .25-mile creek section south of Highway 101 currently consists of differing channel geometries (concrete walls, earthen banks, and sections of rip-rap), concrete bridges and

culverts. The creek banks and channel are highly degraded in a straightened configuration and dominated by non-native vegetation providing substandard habitat conditions. The reach of the creek spanning south of the highway to the ocean is a mix of freshwater and estuarine conditions that are controlled by estuary mouth conditions (open or closed to flows from the ocean) at East Beach. The creek is surrounded by homes, streets, sidewalks, bike paths, a park, Dwight Murphy Field, and the Santa Barbara Zoo parking lot. Pedestrians, bicyclists, and vehicles heavily traffic the area.

Sycamore Creek has insufficient channel capacity through the project reach which significantly impacts upstream flooding of a densely packed, largely low-income residential area within the lower east side neighborhood north of Highway 101, as well as recreational and open space parks and infrastructure south of Highway 101. In addition, while the habitat in the area is highly degraded, the creek and estuary have potential to be restored to support special status species (tidewater gobies, southern steelhead, and southwestern pond turtles) and numerous native birds, aquatic animals, and plants.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: The City of Santa Barbara has successfully administered previous grant funds and carried out similar types of projects including large creek and estuary restoration projects with Conservancy and local funds. The City will continue to maintain the future implementation project site. The restoration project site will be maintained by the City's Creeks Division, and the bridge structures will be monitored and maintained by Caltrans' Structures and City Streets and Engineering Divisions. The City has permanent funding for creek stewardship (Measure B) which will ensure the sustainable, long-term management, maintenance, and monitoring of the project.

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 includes development of a plan using nature-based solutions to decrease flooding in a disadvantaged community and increased climate resilience for the City of Santa Barbara. The project is consistent with the California Climate Adaptation Strategy's priority to "build public health and safety to protect against increasing climate risks". The project is identified as a high priority in the City's 2021 Sea Level Rise Adaptation Plan (Adaptation Plan) and the 2023 Local Hazard Mitigation Plan. When completed, the project will benefit disadvantaged and severely disadvantaged communities of the Lower Eastside by reducing impacts from flooding and other coastal hazards. This neighborhood is identified in the Adaptation Plan as particularly vulnerable to the impacts of sea-level rise given its classification as low-income, disadvantaged,

low-English proficiency, and high percentage of minority residents. The budget is reasonable based on the City Engineering Department's own cost estimate and is consistent with creek restoration projects the City has implemented. The City will contribute a total of $1,165,000 of funding and in-kind support to this phase of the project (See Project Financing section).

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 will engage with all local Chumash Tribal bands as part of public outreach on the project including ongoing engagement with Chumash representatives to receive input on the restoration design approach and community educational opportunities. The City is already working closely with Chumash Tribal bands on another waterfront area project with the goal of reestablishing access to ancestral lands and village sites and will use that approach as a model for this project.

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

The project is centered around resiliency and climate adaptation, and plans will identify the expected lifespan of proposed actions in light of sea-level rise or other climate change impacts. The options considered will avoid making future climate adaptation more difficult.

5. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

The project will advance planning and adaptation efforts that will: a) provide co-benefits and alleviate multiple stressors within communities, such as improving flood protection, habitat enhancements, improving beach habitats, and maintaining beach access, water quality, and other environmental benefits; b) increase equity and environmental justice by benefitting underserved, low-income, and/or frontline communities on the City's Lower Eastside and; c) increase community-preparedness and resilience to future climate change impacts such as sea-level rise, storm surge high tide events, and flooding. The project will include naturalized creek banks with restoration including tree planting and opportunities for community education and engagement through project outreach.

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

The project will include stakeholder meetings, a public comment period, and multiple public meetings including the Creeks Advisory Committee, Planning Commission, Sustainability Council Committee, and City Council. Stakeholder meetings will target nearby property owners as well as those impacted by upstream flooding. Meetings will be held both in person, and with virtual options. City produced materials and mailers will include information in both English and Spanish. Flooding is an issue of very high concern for the lower eastside community that includes a number of Spanish speakers. Specific events and outreach will occur to this community in Spanish and through trusted members of the community (Promotores Network or similar organization).

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	**$2,015,000**
City of Santa Barbara	$700,000
Project Total	**$2,715,000**

The anticipated sources of Conservancy funding for this project are from two appropriations. The first 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 (PRC), Sections 90000 to 95015). The 2024 Climate Bond, PRC Section 92015 allocates funds for "the purpose of coastal and combined flood management projects and activities for developed shoreline areas… at risk of current flooding and flooding due to sea level rise." The project site is within the combined coastal and creek floodplain of lower Sycamore Creek. The project is consistent with the 2024 Climate Bond because it will develop plans to reduce flooding along Lower Sycamore Creek into neighboring developed areas, including a severely disadvantaged community.

The second anticipated funding source is an appropriation from the General Fund to the Conservancy for "urgent sea level rise adaptation and coastal resilience" (Budget Act of 2023, Chapter 12, Statutes of 2023 (SB 101) as amended by Chapter 38, Statutes of 2023 (AB 102)). The coastal resilience funds are available for the purposes set forth in Section 52 of Chapter 258 of the Statutes of 2021, which sets forth a detailed description of the purposes of the coastal resilience funds, including projects that build resilience for coastal communities and restore and increase the resilience of coastal ecosystems to climate change impacts. The project is consistent with this funding because it will restore a reach of Lower Sycamore Creek and decrease impacts of flooding to adjacent developed areas. These improvements will increase community and ecosystem resilience to climate change impacts from increased storm intensities and sea level rise induced flooding.

The City will provide approximately $465,000 of in-kind support to this planning effort, in addition to the $700,000 financial contribution. This in-kind support includes administrative overhead and staff time from various City departments.

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 will be undertaken 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), the Conservancy is authorized to award grants to public agencies to undertake projects 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. Section 31113 requires the Conservancy to prioritize projects that use natural infrastructure to help coastal communities adapt to climate change and projects that provide multiple public benefits, including, but not limited to, protection of communities, natural resources, and recreational opportunities. Consistent with these sections, the project will plan a creek restoration that will use a nature-based measure to reduce flooding in urban areas adjacent to and upstream of lower Sycamore Creek and that will improve habitat for fish and wildlife.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S 2023-2027 STRATEGIC PLAN:

Consistent with **Goal 1.1, Commit Funding to Benefit Systemically Excluded Communities**, the proposed project will advance planning for a project that will reduce flooding in a severely disadvantaged community.

Consistent with **Goal 4.1, Sea Level Rise Adaptation Projects**, the proposed project will complete a plan to adapt Lower Sycamore Creek using nature-based measures to protect local communities and natural resources in the City of Santa Barbara from the impacts of flooding from coastal storms and sea-level rise.

Consistent with **Goal 4.3 Multi-Benefit Nature-Based Climate Adaptation**, the proposed project will prepare a plan that increases the coastal resilience of Santa Barbara's Eastside neighborhood by advancing nature-based climate adaptation solutions to reduce flooding impacts while also improving habitat in Lower Sycamore Creek.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The proposed planning project consists of preparing feasibility and technical studies, preparing preliminary designs, and conducting California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) review. Thus, the proposed project involves only data gathering, resource evaluation, planning, and feasibility analyses for possible future actions that have not yet been approved or funded. These activities are statutorily exempt from review under CEQA pursuant to Title 14 of the 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 an environmental resource. The project will consider environmental factors and will not cause a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource.

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