

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

April 23, 2026

SHARK FIN COVE COASTAL ACCESS PLANNING PROJECT

Project No. 26-002-01

Project Manager: Lexi Morrison

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$350,000 to the County of Santa Cruz to undertake the Shark Fin Cove Coastal Access Planning Project, consisting of technical studies, preliminary design, and environmental review for a paved coastal access parking lot with accessible pedestrian pathways at Shark Fin Cove in Santa Cruz County.

LOCATION: Shark Fin Cove, 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 three hundred fifty thousand dollars (\$350,000) to the County of Santa Cruz (the “grantee”) to undertake the Shark Fin Cove Coastal Access Planning Project, consisting of technical studies, preliminary design, and environmental review for a paved coastal access parking lot with accessible pedestrian pathways at Shark Fin Cove in Santa Cruz County.

Prior to commencement of the project, the grantee shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy 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:

1. The proposed authorization is consistent with Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding a System of Public Accessways.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a \$350,000 grant to the County of Santa Cruz for technical studies, preliminary design, and environmental review for a paved coastal access parking lot with accessible pedestrian pathways at Shark Fin Cove in Santa Cruz County (the "project").

The existing unpaved turnout is located within the Caltrans right-of-way along Highway 1 in northern Santa Cruz County (see Exhibit 1). The project will improve public safety and provide more sustainable coastal access at one of Santa Cruz County's most heavily visited shoreline destinations.

Shark Fin Cove has become an increasingly popular beach and coastal access point, yet it currently lacks a paved parking lot. Current parking at Shark Fin Cove is limited to an informal unpaved gravel turnout immediately adjacent to Highway 1, where there are no defined ingress or egress points, no marked spaces, and no safe pedestrian circulation. During peak periods, vehicles spill onto the highway shoulder and pedestrians walk close to fast-moving traffic, creating serious safety hazards for motorists, cyclists, and beachgoers.

The existing unpaved turnout currently serves as the access point for visitors to the adjacent Coastal Rail Trail, which is also a segment of the California Coastal Trail. To ensure safe and convenient use, a properly designed parking area with accessible pedestrian pathways is necessary for this coastal access site. Additionally, the nearby Cotoni-Coast Dairies National Monument (Exhibit 1) attracts visitors who frequently park at the existing unpaved gravel turnout, heightening safety concerns.

The surrounding North Coast and Davenport communities have long expressed concern about unsafe parking conditions at the unpaved gravel turnout. The existing unpaved turnout was specifically identified as a high priority location for parking and access improvements in Santa Cruz County's North Coast Facilities and Management Plan, and local residents have advocated for improvements to reduce traffic conflicts and improve public access. The California Department of Parks and Recreation, the California Coastal Commission, and the Santa Cruz County Regional Transportation Commission support the project. Community engagement will be conducted as part of the project, and Santa Cruz County will continue to engage the

community throughout design and environmental review. Tribal consultation will be conducted as part of the environmental review process.

The project will prepare technical studies (including traffic, biological, cultural, geotechnical, and drainage analyses); 30% and 60% design plans and specifications; environmental review; and permitting and agency coordination for replacement of the existing unpaved turnout with a designed, clearly delineated parking lot that separates vehicles and pedestrians from highway traffic. The project will also prepare designs for an accessible pedestrian connection to the Santa Cruz Rail Trail/California Coastal Trail. The project plans are anticipated to include marked parking spaces, defined entry and exit points, accessible pathways connecting the parking area to the coastal trail, safety barriers as needed, and stormwater improvements.

Developing plans for a paved, clearly marked parking lot with defined entry and exit points at this location will also create a safer access point for Coastal Rail Trail users, reducing conflicts between highway traffic, parked vehicles, and people walking or biking. Advancing the design and completing environmental review will position Santa Cruz County to pursue construction funding and ultimately implement a safer, more resilient coastal access lot.

Site Description: The project site is located along the west side of Highway 1 approximately 0.75 miles south of Davenport in northern Santa Cruz County (see Exhibit 1). The site consists of an approximately 600-foot-long unpaved gravel turnout within the existing Caltrans right-of-way. The turnout is currently used for roadside parking by visitors accessing Shark Fin Cove, and the Coastal Rail Trail, which is designated as a segment of the California Coastal Trail. The existing turnout is unpaved, unmarked, and lacks defined ingress and egress, ADA-compliant access, or safe pedestrian connections to the coastal trail, resulting in conflicts between vehicles, pedestrians, and highway traffic. The site is directly adjacent to Segment 5 of the Coastal Rail Trail, which is currently under construction, and is expected to serve as a key access point for trail users. However, there is currently no clearly defined or safe connection between parking area, the beach access trail, and the Rail Trail corridor. The adjacent coastal bluff and beach areas are owned and managed by California State Parks. The County of Santa Cruz will obtain the necessary encroachment permit and agreements from Caltrans to carry out the project within the right-of-way.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: Santa Cruz County has extensive experience managing state grants and delivering coastal access and roadway improvement projects, including projects previously funded by the Conservancy. Santa Cruz County has qualified engineering and environmental staff and will retain consultants as needed to complete planning and design. Santa Cruz County is coordinating with Caltrans and will enter into a maintenance agreement to ensure long-term management of the completed facility.

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 provides multiple benefits with outcomes including planning, designs, and environmental review for a formalized parking facility, moving forward a practical, well-defined solution that improves safety for drivers and pedestrians, expands coastal access, and supports responsible public use of the coast. The proposed budget is reasonable and based on comparable recent projects constructed within Caltrans right-of-way.

The project advances statewide and regional goals that, when implemented will improve and maximize public coastal access, including policies in the Coastal Act and the County’s Local Coastal Program, and will provide safer access to the nearby Coastal Rail Trail by creating a clearly defined parking area and pedestrian route connecting visitors to the trail.

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

The proposed project provides designs for long-term safety and access benefits while withstanding the challenging coastal environment along Highway 1. The project designs will incorporate durable materials, proper drainage design, and stormwater treatment features to manage runoff and reduce erosion, helping protect both the facility and adjacent coastal resources over time. Because the project plans for a parking lot to be constructed within the existing Caltrans right-of-way and outside areas vulnerable to sea level rise, it is not expected to be adversely affected by projected coastal inundation during its lifespan. The design will also account for increasingly intense storm events to ensure the facility remains functional and safe under changing climate conditions. By formalizing access in a controlled footprint, the project design avoids creating new long-term vulnerabilities and positions the site for responsible management as visitation continues to grow.

4. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

The project delivers multiple public safety, access, and environmental benefits in one coordinated effort. The project will create plans that, when implemented, significantly reduce unsafe vehicle movements, eliminate hazardous shoulder parking along Highway 1, and provide clearly defined pedestrian routes separated from high-speed traffic. The project will develop plans to expand ADA-compliant access to the coast, improving equitable access for visitors with mobility challenges who are currently discouraged by uneven gravel and unsafe conditions. When implemented, environmental benefits include managed stormwater treatment, reduced bluff and roadside degradation from unmanaged parking, and better protection of sensitive coastal resources. The project also strengthens regional connectivity by developing plans to provide safe access to the Coastal Rail Trail and to support multimodal transportation and long-term climate goals by encouraging biking and walking. Together, the project plans improvements that will enhance public safety, protect natural resources, and ensure sustainable access to one of the County’s most heavily visited coastal sites.

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

The project has been shaped by sustained input and strong support from the North Coast and Davenport communities, where traffic safety concerns have been raised for many years. Safer access at the site was identified as a high priority in the County’s North Coast Facilities and Management Plan, developed with active participation from local residents, multiple local, state and federal agencies, and other stakeholders. Community members have consistently voiced concerns about unsafe parking conditions, pedestrian exposure to Highway 1 traffic, and the growing impacts of increased visitation. Santa Cruz County has advanced this project in direct response to those concerns and will continue engaging residents, partner agencies, and user groups as design progresses to ensure the final improvements reflect local needs and values. Broad support for the project is also reflected in letters from State Parks, the Coastal Commission, and the Regional Transportation Commission, demonstrating regional alignment around the importance of improving safety and access at this site (Exhibit 3).

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$350,000
Project Total	\$350,000

The anticipated source of Conservancy funds for this project is an appropriation from the Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006 (“Proposition 84”), codified at Public Resources Code Sections 75001 - 75130. Section 75060(e) allocates funding specifically for the protection of Monterey Bay and its watersheds, which includes the project site. Section 75060(b) authorizes the use of Proposition 84 bond funds for projects that promote access to and enjoyment of the coastal resources of the state and are consistent with the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.

“Protection,” as defined in Public Resources Code Section 75005(m), includes actions necessary to allow the continued use and enjoyment of property or natural resources and includes “acquisition, development, restoration, preservation and interpretation.” Consistent with these provisions, the proposed project will complete planning tasks to develop a formal paved parking lot at Shark Fin Cove in northern Santa Cruz County. By conducting planning activities to replace an existing unpaved turnout along Highway 1 with a clearly delineated lot that will make it more accessible and safe for the public to visit and that includes pedestrian accessways, the project will protect continued public enjoyment of and sustainable access to a heavily visited shoreline site. The project is consistent with the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, as discussed in the “Consistency with Conservancy’s enabling legislation” section below. The proposed project is thus consistent with the funding requirements of Proposition 84.

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), which authorizes the Conservancy to play a principal role in

implementing a system of public accessways to and along the state's coastline. Section 31400 directs the Conservancy to enhance public access and enjoyment of coastal resources. Section 31400.1 directs the Conservancy to award grants to "develop, operate, or manage, lands for public access purposes to and along the coast." The proposed project will advance this mandate by preparing plans that would improve public access to a heavily visited segment of the Santa Cruz County coastline by replacing the existing unpaved turnout, which is unsafe and unmanaged, with a paved, clearly marked parking lot with defined entry and exit points. The project supports safe and equitable access to coastal recreational opportunities while protecting coastal resources from unmanaged impacts. Consistent with Section 31400.2, the following factors were considered in determining the amount of Conservancy funding for this project: the total funding available for coastal public access projects, Santa Cruz County's fiscal capacity and local funding contribution, the urgency of addressing documented public safety hazards along Highway 1, and the Conservancy's project selection criteria, as described above.

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

Consistent with **Goal 2.3 Expand Accessibility**, the proposed project will plan and design parking spaces for people with disabilities and accessible pedestrian pathways connecting the parking area to the existing coastal trail corridor, improving equitable access to the shoreline for visitors with disabilities.

Consistent with **Goal 2.5 Recreation Facilities & Amenities**, the project will design a formal, paved parking lot, pedestrian pathways, and associated safety improvements as described above.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The proposed project is statutorily exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act pursuant to Title 14 California Code of Regulations (CCR), Section 15262, which exempts projects that involve only planning studies and feasibility analyses for possible future actions that have not yet been approved or funded. Consistent with this section, the project will prepare planning studies, preliminary engineering designs, and environmental review documents for a proposed paved parking lot and associated access improvements, but will not authorize or fund construction.

The proposed project is also categorically exempt under 14 CCR Section 15306, which exempts basic data collection, research, and resource evaluation activities that will not result in disturbance to an environmental resource. Activities funded through the project will include technical studies such as biological, cultural, geotechnical, traffic, and drainage analyses to inform project design and environmental review.

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