

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

June 18, 2026

**GREAT REDWOOD TRAIL DEVELOPMENT—STATE ROUTE 36 TO FERNBRIDGE**

Project No. 26-016-01

Project Manager: Hannah Bartee

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$922,000 to the City of Fortuna to undertake the Great Redwood Trail Development—State Route 36 to Fernbridge Project, consisting of coordinating with California Native American tribes, conducting community engagement, conducting resource studies, conducting vegetation management, and preparing 30% designs for an approximately 6.2-mile segment of the Great Redwood Trail in the City of Fortuna and unincorporated Humboldt County.

**LOCATION:** Along the former Northwestern Pacific Railroad line from State Route 36 to Fernbridge, through the City of Fortuna, and within unincorporated areas of Humboldt County.

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EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map & Photos](#)

Exhibit 2: [Great Redwood Trail Master Plan](#)

Exhibit 3: [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 nine hundred twenty-two thousand dollars (\$922,000) to the City of Fortuna (“the grantee”) to undertake the Great Redwood Trail Development—State Route 36 to Fernbridge Project, consisting of coordinating with California Native American tribes, conducting community engagement, conducting resource studies, conducting vegetation management, and preparing 30% designs for an approximately 6.2-mile segment of the Great Redwood Trail in the City of Fortuna and unincorporated Humboldt County.

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.
3. Evidence that all approvals required to conduct the project have been obtained.

The grantee shall incorporate the guidelines of the 'Great Redwood Trail Master Plan' and, to the extent appropriate, 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 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 grant of up to \$922,000 to the City of Fortuna to undertake the Great Redwood Trail Development—State Route 36 to Fernbridge Project, consisting of conducting resource studies, preparing 30% designs, conducting community engagement, coordinating with California Native American tribes, and conducting vegetation management for an approximately 6.2-mile segment of the Great Redwood Trail in the City of Fortuna and unincorporated Humboldt County (the "project" ).

The project site consists of an existing Great Redwood Trail Agency (GRTA) railroad corridor extending approximately six miles from Fernbridge to State Route 36 through and adjacent to the City of Fortuna in Humboldt County (Exhibit 1). The corridor follows a former Northwestern Pacific Railroad / North Coast Rail Authority alignment that has been railbanked for trail use and is currently overgrown, with limited public access and remnants of historic rail infrastructure. Railbanking is the process by which unprofitable or unused rail corridors can be converted to trails for recreational or transportation purposes. Existing conditions include unmanaged vegetation and the absence of maintained pathways, which restrict safe pedestrian and bicycle access. As identified in the Great Redwood Trail Master Plan (Master Plan)(Exhibit 2), this segment represents a priority link in the North Coast trail network and an opportunity to repurpose an underutilized transportation corridor into a continuous multi-use non-motorized trail while maintaining the integrity of the historic rail alignment.

Segments of the Great Redwood Trail (GRT) in the nearby cities of Eureka and Arcata are already complete and have expanded the regional trail network. The recent opening of Humboldt Bay Trail South, connecting Eureka and Arcata and funded in part by the Conservancy, has increased local and state-wide support for and momentum for the development of additional Class I multi-use trail segments to extend this active transportation corridor (Exhibit 3). Furthermore, current transportation infrastructure planning projects within the City of Fortuna at 12<sup>th</sup> St. and Kenmar Rd. and at State Route 211 by Fernbridge, led by Caltrans and the City of Fortuna, respectively, present opportunities to align timing for this

GRT segment development so that the trail crossings at these road and highway intersections can be thoughtfully incorporated into each design project.

The resource studies and surveys to be conducted as part of the project are needed to obtain regulatory permits, to address environmental conditions that affect trail development along the former railroad corridor, and to be consistent with the Master Plan, which requires study and review of environmental considerations pursuant to GRTA's adopted commitments to resource protection, environmental restoration, and land stewardship. Studies and surveys to be completed include an Aquatic Resources Delineation, a Biological Resources Study and Biological Assessment, a study of scenic resources and visual/aesthetic considerations, an Archaeological Survey Report, a Historic Resources Evaluation Report, a Hydraulic Study, and a Floodplain Evaluation Report. The project includes using the studies to prepare National Environmental Policy Act (NEPA) documentation to make the project more competitive to receive federal funding via Caltrans for future phases of design, permitting, and construction via their Active Transportation Program and similar federal funding programs.

The project's preparation of 30% designs will build on the results of the project's outreach and environmental analysis. The project's design work includes evaluation of route alignments, assessment of existing bridge structures for suitability for adaptive reuse as non-motorized trail crossings, development of conceptual bridge improvements, and preparation of 30% designs that are feasible and implementable.

The project's vegetation management will occur in partnership with the California Conservation Corps and other community organizations and consists of removing vegetation in the GRTA right of way to facilitate site access for the studies, surveys, and design development.

The GRTA's right-of-way passes through many tribal ancestral lands, and the former railroad on which GRTA's right-of-way is located was part of California's history of tribal genocide, forced relocation, and cultural erasure. Portions of the project area are adjacent to the Eel River, which is significant to California Native American tribes. The project includes ongoing coordination efforts with California Native American tribes as further described in Project Selection Criteria #3 below.

The project also includes community outreach and engagement. The City of Fortuna will coordinate with GRTA, the Conservancy, the community, neighbors, non-profits, trail user groups, and other key stakeholders with special ties to the project area. Meetings, as further described in Project Selection Criteria #6 below, and site visits will inform fieldwork and designs and results will be shared and incorporated as appropriate.

The GRT is proposed within the over 300-mile length of the former North Coast Railroad Authority right-of-way, from San Francisco Bay north to the Humboldt Bay. The GRT, once complete, will be the longest rail-trail in the nation. The portions of the rail right-of-way in Mendocino, Trinity, and Humboldt counties are owned by the GRTA. The Marin and Sonoma portions of the rail right-of-way are owned by the Sonoma-Marín Area Rail Transit (SMART), and SMART will be responsible for planning and developing the GRT Southern Segment in those counties with Larkspur at its southern terminus. The final connection between Larkspur and the Golden Gate Bridge may be planned, constructed, and operated by others.

The Conservancy assisted GRTA with completion and adoption of the Master Plan for the approximately 231-mile portion of the GRT from the Sonoma County/Mendocino County border, near Hopland, northward through the Cities of Ukiah, Willits, Rio Dell, Fortuna, Eureka, Arcata, and Blue Lake, to its terminus near the Humboldt Bay. Along the way, the trail will pass through redwood forests, grasslands, agricultural lands, and the currently largely inaccessible scenic Eel River Canyon, before skirting the edge of Humboldt Bay. As the right-of-way was formerly used for railroad purposes, it consists of a gentle grade, passing over many rail bridges, trestles, and tunnels, some of which have collapsed. Much of the rail line is in good condition for conversion to trail, but in some areas, erosive geology and deferred maintenance create challenges that will need to be addressed through careful and systematic planning.

GRTA adopted the Master Plan on March 19, 2026. It is anticipated that when authorizing construction of GRT segments, GRTA will require each segment to meet the requirements of the Master Plan, adopted GRTA policies, and GRTA enabling legislation. The GRTA Board also adopted a California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) exemption for the Master Plan, pursuant to the terms of California Public Resources Code Section 21080.57. The City of Fortuna will prepare the 30% designs to be consistent with the GRT Master Plan.

**Site Description:** The project site consists of an existing Great Redwood Trail Agency (GRTA) railroad corridor extending approximately 6.2 miles from State Route 36 to Fernbridge at State Route 211, through and adjacent to the City of Fortuna in Humboldt County. The corridor follows a former Northwestern Pacific Railroad / North Coast Rail Authority alignment that has been railbanked for trail use and is currently overgrown, with limited public access and remnants of historic rail infrastructure. The corridor crosses Strongs Creek, a tributary to the Eel River which provides habitat for anadromous salmonids, using an intact rail bridge. Existing conditions include unmanaged vegetation and the absence of maintained pathways, which restrict safe pedestrian and bicycle access. As identified in the Master Plan, this segment represents a priority link in the North Coast trail network and an opportunity to repurpose an underutilized transportation corridor into a continuous Class I multi-use trail while maintaining the integrity of the historic rail alignment.

**Grant Applicant Qualifications:** The City of Fortuna currently manages large grants with the Coastal Conservancy, Wildlife Conservation Board, State Water Resources Control Board, and other state agencies for a variety of public serving projects. The City of Fortuna will manage this grant with its existing staff. It will be supported by its consultant team led by GHD, which also has substantial experience, in the North Coast and elsewhere, implementing activities in this grant's scope of work related to environmental compliance, trail design, and stakeholder engagement. Once constructed, the facility will be owned by GRTA. The City will work collaboratively with GRTA to develop a strategy for management and maintenance of the 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 proposed grant will advance the planning and design of the GRT, which will be a world-class, multi-use, rail trail that will provide significant recreational and economic benefits to Californians. The development of the GRT is feasible, with significant portions already completed. The trail will take advantage of an intact rail right of way in Humboldt County. The trail segment for this project was identified as a Tier 1 Priority for development in the GRT Master Plan. The project area is located within a disadvantaged community, with a severely disadvantaged community immediately to the south. All development phases for this trail segment will utilize local contractors and consultants that employ individuals from disadvantaged and severely disadvantaged communities on the north coast. Once constructed, the new trail will be a public asset offering recreation, active transportation, and economic opportunities for these disadvantaged and severely disadvantaged communities, as well as for visitors from around the region and state.

The project will also support the state’s Outdoors for All Initiative, specifically by connecting statewide and regional trail networks to provide diverse experiences (Outdoors for All Strategy 1.7).

### **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.**

Engagement with tribes was a key activity in the development of the Master Plan and resulted in the development of recommendations, which incorporate tribal input and seek to address concerns expressed by tribes for the design and management of GRT segments. Additional tribal engagement will occur throughout the project and will include stipends to tribes traditionally and culturally affiliated to the project area to support their participation. The project team, in coordination with GRTA and Conservancy staff will hold one-on-one meetings with tribes, and/or presentations at tribal council meetings if requested, to discuss the project’s current and future phases. The project includes consultation and collaboration with tribes regarding the preservation of archaeological and cultural resources or methods to mitigate, to the extent feasible, impacts to these resources. Tribal staff or representatives will be invited to join archaeology pedestrian field surveys, as well as special status plant surveys to identify ethnobotanical resources. Tribes will also be invited to complete ethnobotanical surveys independently and share results with the project team. The project team will also seek early tribal input on future trail amenities and related design elements that reflect and celebrate indigenous perspectives.

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

The project will support long-term, sustainable public benefits by advancing the planning and design for a paved Class I multi-use trail facility with an anticipated design life of approximately 30 years. Completion of environmental studies and surveys will enable the trail design and future implementation to be informed by site-specific environmental conditions, floodplain constraints, and cultural resource considerations, reducing long-term maintenance risks and supporting durable infrastructure investments. By addressing these issues early in project development, the project will help ensure that future construction proceeds efficiently and that the trail can reliably serve community and regional users over its intended lifespan.

Project benefits will also be resilient over time by positioning the trail segment for successful implementation and adaptive management. The proposed planning effort will establish a clear, environmentally responsible framework that supports future funding pursuits, permitting, and phased construction, ensuring continuity of benefits as the GRT network expands. As a paved Class I facility, the trail is intended to provide consistent, low-maintenance access for a wide range of users, helping ensure continued delivery of active transportation, recreational, and community connectivity benefits for decades while maintaining flexibility to respond to future environmental or operational considerations.

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

This project supports equitable access to active transportation and outdoor recreation by addressing a critical gap in the regional trail network, particularly for disadvantaged, severely disadvantaged, and underserved community members with limited access to off-highway walking and bicycling facilities. As a component of the larger GRT network, the project contributes to regional goals related to active transportation, recreation, tourism, and community connectivity, while supporting durable public infrastructure investments designed to serve North Coast communities for decades. A 2023 assessment of the economic benefits of a complete GRT networks estimates that this trail segment within the Fortuna area will generate over \$1.73 million annually in benefits, including (1) health benefits such as mortality reduction from opportunities for increased physical activity; (2) transportation benefits such as reduced traffic congestion and vehicle crash costs, reduced road maintenance costs and reduced vehicle emissions; and (3) economic benefits for the City of Fortuna and local businesses through increased tourism, food/meals and other retail purchases (GRT Master Plan, Appendix A: Economic Benefits Assessment). The project's studies and surveys will identify natural, aquatic, floodplain, and cultural resources early in project development so that the trail can be designed in an environmentally responsible way and support responsible stewardship of the Eel River corridor.

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

All GRT segment development projects, including this project, are built on a foundation of extensive community engagement conducted during the preparation of the GRT Master Plan. That past engagement, including a public workshop held in the City of Fortuna in March 2023, informed initial project goals, trail design elements, amenities, access points, opportunities and constraints, and management recommendations for the GRT segment that is the focus of this

project. The City of Fortuna is also currently holding a series of strategic plan visioning sessions in which trails have been a recurring theme heard from the community. Specifically for this project, the City of Fortuna will lead and implement a comprehensive public engagement and outreach program to directly connect with local decision makers, the general public, adjacent landowners, underserved groups from the community, and distinct trail user groups (e.g., equestrian users.) Engagement efforts will include illustrative exhibits, presentation materials for City Council meetings, and coordinated communications products to ensure transparent and effective information sharing throughout project development. The City of Fortuna, in collaboration with GRTA, will also lead targeted outreach to key stakeholder groups, including adjacent private landowners, trail user groups, and community organizations.

**PROJECT FINANCING**

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b>	<b>\$922,000</b>
<b>Project Total</b>	<b>\$922,000</b>

The anticipated source of funding for the project is a fiscal year 25/26 appropriation to the Conservancy from the Safe Drinking Water, Wildfire Prevention, Drought Preparedness, and Clean Air Fund (Proposition 4, also called the 2024 Climate Bond), codified at Public Resources Code sections 90000-95015. The Budget Act of 2025 specifically appropriated Proposition 4 funds under Public Resources Code section 94030 to the Conservancy for the GRTA to complete the Great Redwood Trail. Section 94030 allocates funds for projects to expand recreational opportunities and public access to state and public park non-motorized trails, including creation of new trails. The project is an appropriate use of these funds because it will advance planning and design for a Tier 1 priority trail segment of the GRT. At its May 21, 2026 meeting, the GRTA authorized the Conservancy to grant these Proposition 4 funds directly to City of Fortuna for the project.

Consistent with the anticipated funding source, the proposed project will carry out tribal and community outreach and conduct work that will contribute towards completion of the GRT as described above.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION**

The proposed project will be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31400 et seq.) related to public accessways. Section 31409 authorizes the Conservancy to award grants and provide assistance to public agencies and nonprofit organizations to establish and expand inland trail systems that may be linked to the California Coastal Trail. Consistent with Section 31409, the authorization will fund work to plan an approximately 6.2-mile segment of the GRT, which will connect to and include segments of the California Coastal Trail.

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

Consistent with **Goal 1.1 Commit Funding to Benefit Systemically Excluded Communities**, the proposed grant will assist with planning and design of facilities that will improve recreational conditions and active transportation options for disadvantaged and severely disadvantaged communities in Humboldt County.

Consistent with **Goal 2.4 Build Trails**, the proposed grant will assist with the planning and design of a segment of the GRT, which is one of five flagship trails identified in the Conservancy's 2023-2027 Strategic Plan.

Consistent with **Goal 2.5 Recreation Facilities & Amenities**, the proposed grant will assist with the planning and design for facilities that will enhance recreational opportunities, including benches, education and interpretive facilities, public art, and signage.

**CEQA COMPLIANCE:**

California Public Resources Code (PRC) Section 21080.57 exempts from the California Environmental Quality Act "any activity or approval necessary for or incidental to planning, design, site acquisition, construction, operation, or maintenance of public park or nonmotorized recreational trail facilities funded in whole or in part by the Safe Drinking Water, Wildfire Prevention, Drought Preparedness, and Clean Air Bond Act of 2024," also known as Proposition 4. The project consists of conducting studies, surveys, and planning and preparing designs for developing a 6.6-mile nonmotorized trail that will be funded whole or in part by Proposition 4 funds and is therefore exempt under PRC Section 21080.57. The project's vegetation management is necessary to conduct the studies and surveys and therefore is within the scope of this exemption.

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