

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

June 18, 2026

GREAT REDWOOD TRAIL: WILLITS TO LONGVALE PLANNING AND DESIGN

Project No. 24-063-01

Project Manager: Christine Aralia

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$1,578,000 to Mendocino Land Trust to carry out the Great Redwood Trail Willits to Longvale Planning Project, consisting of conducting topographic surveys, preparing a geotechnical report and 65% designs, preparing permit applications, providing construction cost estimates, conducting community outreach, and coordinating with California Native American tribes for a 12.7-mile segment of the Great Redwood Trail in the City of Willits and unincorporated Mendocino County.

LOCATION: Along the former Northwest Pacific Railroad line from the north side of East Commercial Street in Willits for 12.7 miles north to Longvale, north of the intersection of the former railroad line and Highway 162, and in unincorporated areas of Mendocino County, California.

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [Project Site Photos](#)

Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution and findings.

Resolution:

Authorization to disburse up to one million five hundred seventy eight thousand dollar (\$1,578,000) to Mendocino Land Trust to implement the Great Redwood Trail Willits to Longvale Planning Project, consisting of conducting topographic surveys, preparing a geotechnical report and 65% designs, preparing permit applications and construction cost estimates, conducting community outreach, and coordinating with California Native American

tribes for a 12.7-mile segment of the Great Redwood Trail in the City of Willits and unincorporated Mendocino 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.

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.
3. Mendocino Land Trust is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Authorization to disburse up to \$1,578,000 to Mendocino Land Trust (MLT) to implement the Great Redwood Trail Willits to Longvale Planning Project, consisting of conducting topographic surveys, preparing a geotechnical report and 65% designs, preparing permit applications and construction cost estimates, conducting community outreach, and coordinating with California Native American tribes for development of a 12.7-mile segment of the Great Redwood Trail (GRT) in the City of Willits and unincorporated Mendocino County.

The project site is a Great Redwood Trail Agency (GRTA)-owned 12.7-mile segment (comprising GRT Segments #10 and #11) of the 307-mile GRT, extending from the north side of East Commercial Street in the City of Willits to Longvale, north of the intersection of Highway 162 and the former railroad line, in unincorporated Mendocino County (Exhibit 1). This GRT segment is identified as a Tier 1 priority in the Master Plan.

The first phase of planning for this trail segment was completed by MLT with \$503,400 in Conservancy funding authorized in 2025. Reconnaissance level geotechnical studies, archaeological cultural resource investigations, and historical and biological resource surveys for the trail corridor and for visitor amenities including trailheads, parking areas, and road crossings were completed as part of 20% design. The project will continue the design process, developing detailed trail surveys and 65% designs for this 12.7-mile GRT segment that incorporates and builds upon the results of the resource studies prepared as part of 20% design. The project includes preparing permit applications and working with the permitting

agencies to incorporate their input into the design. Input received as part of tribal coordination and community outreach efforts will also be incorporated. GRTA staff have worked closely with the Conservancy and MLT through the initial design phase, and their involvement is expected to increase.

Tribal outreach and coordination was a significant component of the first phase of planning and will continue throughout this project. 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. The project area is adjacent to Outlet Creek, which is significant to California Native American tribes. Significant tribal concerns have been raised about the GRT broadly, and the project includes coordination efforts with interested California Native American tribal community members to seek to address these concerns during all stages of the project.

The project also includes community outreach. MLT will coordinate with the City of Willits, the GRTA, the Conservancy, the community, neighbors, non-profits and/or individuals with special ties to the project area. Meetings and site visits will inform fieldwork for the studies and results will be shared and incorporated as appropriate.

The City of Willits is constructing 1.6 miles of GRT within city limits, with completion scheduled for fall of 2026. The Conservancy helped fund construction of this segment of GRT through Willits, which is a rail-with-trail (the trail is alongside railroad line that is still used). The north side of East Commercial Street in Willits marks the beginning of the railbanked (unused railroad line that can be repurposed as a trail) section of this former railroad line. The project will plan and design this 12.7-mile railbanked section for conversion from railroad into a public trail.

The GRT is proposed within the 307-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-Marin Area Rail Transit (SMART), and SMART will be responsible for planning and developing the GRT in those counties.

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. The GRTA found the GRT Master Plan exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to the terms of

California Public Resources Code Section 21080.57. MLT will prepare the 65% designs to be consistent with the GRT Master Plan.

Site Description: The 12.7-mile Great Redwood Trail Willits to Longvale project site is located within the GRTA-owned right-of-way, between the north side of East Commercial Street in Willits to Longvale, north of the intersection of Highway 162 and the former railroad line, in unincorporated Mendocino County. This segment of the rail corridor is adjacent to Outlet Creek, a tributary to the Eel River. Outlet Creek is important to local California Native American tribal communities that continue to live in the area as well as those who have been displaced from their ancestral lands. Natural communities in the area include riparian woodlands, coniferous forests, and oak woodlands. Outlet Creek hosts anadromous fish, as do some of its tributaries. The overall condition of this segment is good, with only a couple of challenging features, including a collapsed tunnel, and bridges with deferred maintenance. Road crossings, trailheads, and parking will be incorporated into trail access.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: MLT is a California private non-profit public benefit corporation dedicated to conserving and restoring habitat, scenic areas, and working lands while also providing public access to beautiful places. MLT has demonstrated significant experience as a successful project partner, having completed grants from the Conservancy for acquisitions, including Navarro Point and Pelican Bluffs, while also partnering with the Conservancy to plan, construct, operate, and manage over a dozen segments of the California Coastal Trail on the Mendocino Coast. MLT has nearly completed 20% design for this project with Conservancy support.

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.

This authorization will fund important resource studies and surveys that are needed for planning this 12.7-mile segment of the GRT. The project includes outreach. Future construction will create recreation benefits and employment opportunities.

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 includes and continues MLT’s sustained and focused efforts to engage with California Native American tribes. This planning project includes funding for California Native American tribal participation in 65% design of the 12.7-mile GRT segment. As stated above,

significant tribal concerns have been raised about the GRT broadly, and this planning effort will seek to address these tribal concerns on these segments of the GRT.

4. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

The project includes completion of a geotechnical report and collection of topographic base mapping survey information at 50-foot spacing as basis for future planning and design for the GRT segment adjacent to Outlet Creek, between Willits and Longvale. This level of survey data is critical for ensuring that trail planning design provides protection for and avoids or mitigates impacts to resources. Preliminary quantities of all bid items and a construction cost estimate will also be provided.

Once constructed, the new trail will be a public asset, offering recreation and economic opportunities for a severely disadvantaged community, as well as essential opportunities for public connection to this beautiful, wild, and culturally significant area in remote rural Northern California.

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

The GRT Master Plan team held an in-person workshop with 45 attendees at the City of Willits on March 23, 2023, where MLT staff participated. The workshop focused on listening to the community’s interests and concerns regarding the GRT and featured six hosted stations with opportunities to obtain information, ask questions, and record feedback. This community feedback has been incorporated into the draft GRT Master Plan, which recommends these Willits to Longvale segments as a Tier 1 priority for development.

Future tribal and other local engagement will take diverse forms to maximize engagement of a broad spectrum of interests, providing opportunities to further develop relationships. Engagement will take place via phone calls, emails, and in-person and online meetings.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$1,578,000
Project Total	\$1,578,000

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 nonmotorized trails, including creation of new trails. The project is an appropriate use of these funds because it will plan for a new trail that is a segment of the GRT. At its May 21, 2026 meeting, the GRTA authorized the Conservancy to grant these Proposition 4 funds directly to MLT for this project.

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 a 12.7-mile inland, segment of the Great Redwood Trail, 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 project will facilitate future trail construction, which will provide new recreational opportunities and jobs and stimulate economic development within severely disadvantaged communities in Willits and in unincorporated Mendocino County.

Consistent with **Goal 2.4 Build Trails**, the proposed project will complete much of the planning work to support proposed construction of a new 12.7-mile-long segment of the GRT, which is one of five flagship trails identified in the Conservancy's 2023-2027 Strategic Plan.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

The project is statutorily exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act pursuant to California Public Resources Code (PRC) Section 21080.57, which exempts "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 planning and preparing permit applications for developing 12.7 miles of non-motorized trail and the project will be funded by Proposition 4 funds and is therefore exempt under PRC Section 21080.57.

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