

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

September 17, 2026

HIGHWAY 17 WILDLIFE AND RIDGE TRAIL CROSSINGS

Project No. 26-026-01

Project Manager: Virgilio Cuasay

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$4,000,000 to Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District to undertake the Highway 17 Wildlife and Ridge Trail Crossings project, consisting of constructing a highway undercrossing for wildlife and 2.1 miles of multi-use Bay Area Ridge Trail made up of a highway overcrossing and an adjacent connector trail south of Los Gatos in unincorporated Santa Clara County, and the adoption of findings under the California Environmental Quality Act.

LOCATION: State Route 17, unincorporated Santa Clara County

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location Maps](#)

Exhibit 2: [Project Photos](#)

Exhibit 3: [Bay Area Ridge Trail Council's 2020 Gap Analysis And Action Plan](#)

Exhibit 4: [Bay Area Trails Collaborative Priority Project Profile: Highway 17 Wildlife and Regional Trail Crossing](#)

Exhibit 5: [Highway 17 Wildlife and Regional Trail Crossings and Trail Connections Project Initial Study with Mitigated Negative Declaration/Environmental Assessment with Finding of No Significant Impact](#)

Exhibit 6: [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 four million dollars (\$4,000,000) to Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District ("the grantee") to undertake the Highway 17 Wildlife and Ridge Trail Crossings project, consisting of constructing

a) a highway undercrossing for wildlife and b) 2.1 miles of multi-use Bay Area Ridge Trail made up of a highway overcrossing and a connector trail, in unincorporated Santa Clara 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. A plan for acknowledgement of Conservancy funding and Proposition 4 as the source of that funding.
4. Evidence that all permits and approvals required to implement the project have been obtained.
5. Evidence that the grantee has entered into agreements sufficient to enable the grantee to implement, operate, and maintain 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 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the San Francisco Bay Area Program.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria.
3. The Conservancy has independently reviewed and considered the Highway 17 Wildlife and Regional Trail Crossings and Trail Connections Project Initial Study with Mitigated Negative Declaration/Environmental Assessment with Finding of No Significant Impact adopted by the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District on August 28, 2024 pursuant to the California Environmental Quality Act ("CEQA") and attached to the accompanying staff recommendation as Exhibit 5. The Conservancy finds that the proposed project as designed and mitigated avoids, reduces, or mitigates the potentially significant environmental effects to a less-than-significant level, and that there is no substantial evidence based on the record as a whole that the project will have a significant effect on the environment.

STAFF RECOMMENDATION

PROJECT SUMMARY

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a grant of up to \$4,000,000 to Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District (Midpen) to undertake the Highway 17 Wildlife and Ridge Trail Crossings project (project), consisting of constructing a) a highway undercrossing for wildlife and b) 2.1 miles of multi-use Bay Area Ridge Trail (Ridge Trail) made up of a highway overcrossing and a connector trail, both in unincorporated Santa Clara County (Exhibit 1, Figure

1). This project addresses a physical barrier imposed by State Route 17 (Highway 17) on both wildlife and people.

The project is located north of the Lexington Reservoir at Highway 17 in the foothills of the Santa Cruz Mountains. The highway runs north-south (Exhibit 2, Figure 1) fragmenting 30,000 acres of protected lands (Exhibit 1, Figure 2), including Sierra Azul Open Space Preserve and Bear Creek Redwoods Open Space Preserve, both of which the Conservancy has supported through past grants for land acquisition. These lands represent a key wildlife corridor identified in Critical Linkages: Bay Area & Beyond: Science and Collaboration for Connected Wildlands (Exhibit 1, Figure 3) and is the only Critical Linkage along the 26-mile length of Highway 17. The corridor is crucial for supporting the safe movement of wildlife, including special status species such as the California Central Coast mountain lion, traveling between the Santa Cruz Mountains and the Diablo Range.

With an average daily traffic count of approximately 75,700 vehicles in 2023, Highway 17 acts as an important thoroughfare linking Santa Clara County and the San Francisco Bay Area to the Central Coast. But due to its location, it compromises landscape connectivity for a vast swath of protected lands containing valuable public access resources. Specifically, the project area contains a major gap in the 550-mile Ridge Trail network (Exhibit 1, Figure 4). As a Strategic Initiative in the Bay Area Ridge Trail Council's 2020 Gap Analysis And Action Plan (Exhibit 3) and a priority project identified by the Bay Area Trails Collaborative (Exhibit 4), the project presents an important opportunity to give visitors the means to safely cross the highway and access the preserves on each side. Extensive outreach and communication, including meetings and information sharing, has been ongoing for the past 10 years and the project's current 65% designs reflect the public input gathered through this community engagement. Once complete, the project's 2.1 miles of newly constructed trail will create a new continuous 7.1-mile segment of the Ridge Trail network and a new loop trail in El Sereno Open Space Preserve.

The project consists of the two main elements: 1) constructing a highway undercrossing that will accommodate large mammals (Exhibit 2, Figure 2), and 2) constructing 2.1 miles of Bay Area Ridge Trail consisting of the highway overcrossing and an adjacent connector trail (Exhibit 1, Figure 5), extending from the overcrossing's western end point to the existing Serenity-Aquinas trail in El Sereno Open Space Preserve. To maximize efficiencies and reduce costs, the undercrossing, overcrossing, and connector trail will be constructed concurrently, and utilize San Jose Conservation Corps for manual construction activities.

Major activities include:

Crossings

- Mobilization and site preparation
- Roadway management
- Construction and installation, including the crossing structures, wildlife fencing, walls (retaining and sound), and electrified mats
- Post-construction testing, inspection, and monitoring

Connector Trail

- Mobilization and site preparation

- Erosion and drainage control
- Clearing and grubbing
- Construction of trail, retaining wall, and bridge

Site Description: The project site is located north of the Lexington Reservoir at Highway 17 in the foothills of the Santa Cruz Mountains south of Los Gatos, in unincorporated Santa Clara County. The wildlife undercrossing and the trail overcrossing are located approximately ¼ mile apart, both in the Caltrans Right-of-Way (ROW). While the majority of the 2.1 miles of trail is located on Midpen land, part of it is located on Caltrans ROW (Exhibit 1, Figure 6). The north-south highway fragments wildlife habitat, dividing 30,000 acres of protected lands, including Lexington Reservoir County Park, Midpen's St. Joseph's Hill and Sierra Azul Open Space Preserves on the east side, and the open space preserves of El Sereno and Bear Creek Redwoods on the west side. Existing public access to these lands is made possible by trail networks within the preserves managed by Midpen and Santa Clara County Parks. Immediately to the west of Highway 17 at the project site is the steep terrain of the undeveloped 1,614-acre property Midpen recently purchased for this project that will become part of El Sereno Open Space Preserve where several trails currently exist. These preserves are part of a network of 30,000 acres of protected lands that are home to common wildlife species, including deer, bobcats, and coyote, as well as special status species, including California Central Coast mountain lion, Western pond turtle, California red-legged frog, American badger, ring-tailed cat, Santa Cruz black salamander, California giant salamander, and San Francisco dusky-footed woodrat.

Grant Applicant Qualifications: Midpen has 54 years of experience managing natural resources and public open space. Midpen owns and manages a regional greenbelt system of 70,000 acres of land, 27 open space preserves with diverse habitat, ranging from wetlands to redwoods forests, and over 250 miles of trail. Midpen has over 200 employees across eleven departments including planners, natural resources specialists, and land and facilities field staff, all with experience in preserving and managing open spaces, primarily in the Santa Cruz Mountains and the habitats that reside within them. Midpen has a successful history of securing grants from state agencies and effectively using funding to plan and implement natural resource, public access, and land acquisition projects.

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 on track to complete the planning phase and on track to reach 100% design by February 2027 with contractor bidding to occur shortly afterwards. Midpen is moving toward its fundraising goals through support from diverse sources, including local, federal, and state (see Project Financing). The Ridge Trail is specifically recognized in the California Recreational Trail Plan, as well as numerous regional and local plans including the Bay Area Trails Collaborative's 12 Priority Projects, San Francisco Bay Area's Plan Bay Area 2040 as a Priority Conservation Area, all nine Bay Area County General or Master Trail Plans, and the public access policies in the San Francisco Bay Plan.

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

The Highway 17 crossings will be built with durability in mind for long-term benefits to both wildlife and people. The connector trail will also be built for durability by incorporating reasonable grades and drainage features. The trail alignment will follow the site topography and minimize erosion, sedimentation, and retaining wall needs.

4. Project delivers multiple benefits and significant positive impact.

The project's highway undercrossing is designed to facilitate connectivity across a critical corridor and reduce animal fatalities. The highway overcrossing and connector trail will provide connectivity between parks on either side of the highway, promoting safe and healthy non-motorized travel for active transportation and recreational users alike. The project will provide an opportunity for San Jose Conservation Corps members to gain experience with manual trail construction, including fence installation and vegetation removal.

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

Since the creation of Midpen's 2014 Vision Plan, community engagement for the project has been extensive. Midpen has collected public input across a range of activities, including multiple public meetings and workshops, numerous stakeholder meetings convened in association with releases of various project studies, such the 2016 Preliminary Alternatives Report and the Revised Alternatives Report in 2018, with 130 attendees and 261 comments received. Two public convenings, one in person and one virtually, were held in 2023 to provide updates, discuss project alternatives, outline next steps and gather feedback. Midpen created a website to share information and continues to announce updates through print and digital formats. The project has broad community support (Exhibit 6) from the following: Representative Sam Liccardo, Senator Josh Becker, Supervisor Margaret Abe-Koga, Wildlife Conservation Board, Caltrans District 4, Santa Clara Valley Transportation Authority, Peninsula Open Space Trust, Latino Outdoors, Bay Area Ridge Trail Council, Wildlife Conservation Network, and the Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$4,000,000
Metropolitan Transportation Authority's Priority Conservation Area (PCA) Grant Program	\$750,000

Federal Community Project Funding	\$400,000
Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District	\$11,148,000
Pending funds	\$19,671,000
Project Total	\$35,969,000

Conservancy funds are anticipated to come from the fiscal year 2025/2026 appropriation to the Conservancy from the Safe Drinking Water, Wildfire Prevention, Drought Preparedness, and Clean Air Bond Act of 2024 (“2024 Climate Bond” or “Proposition 4”), codified at Public Resources Code, Sections 90000 – 95015. The 2024 Climate Bond makes funds available to the Conservancy for coastal resilience projects and programs, specifically including projects for purposes of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program under Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 (Section 92010(a)(5)). The proposed project is consistent with Section 92010 because the project is a San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program project for construction of a ridge trail segment as described in the Consistency With Conservancy’s Enabling Legislation” section below.

Additional Conservancy funding is anticipated to come from a Fiscal Year 2022/23 appropriation from the General Fund to the Conservancy for the purpose of “urgent sea level rise adaptation and coastal resilience needs” (Budget Act 2022, SB 154 as amended by the Budget Act of 2023, SB 101). The coastal resilience funds are available as described 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. These purposes include all the purposes of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program (Chapter 4.5 of Division 21) and nonmotorized trails of statewide significance. The proposed project is consistent with these purposes because it will plan segments of the Bay Area Ridge Trail, a non-motorized trail of statewide significance and a trail that helps achieve the goals of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program.

The Metropolitan Transportation Authority’s PCA Grant Program is funded through the One Bay Area Grant Program and offers funding for projects that advance Bay Area conservation priorities. Federal Community Project Funding is funded through, direct appropriations from the federal budget for priority projects identified by Members of Congress for their respective districts. Midpen’s funding is sourced from an allocation of the 2014 voter-approved Measure AA bond.

Pending funds consist of a mix of funding from programs administered by the Wildlife Conservation Board, Peninsula Open Space Trust, and Wildlife Conservation Network that are awaiting approval, private funding from community foundations, and additional funding from Midpen as needed once all other sources are secured.

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 authorization is consistent with Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, Sections 31160-31165 regarding San Francisco Bay Area projects. The proposed authorization is consistent with Section 31162(a) because it will help achieve the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program goal of improving public access to and around the bay through completion of the Bay Trail, the Ridge Trail, and the connecting regional trail system. The proposed project will complete a segment of the Ridge Trail. The proposed project will also help achieve the Section 31162(b) goal to protect, restore, and enhance natural habitats and connecting corridors by constructing a Highway 17 undercrossing to enable wildlife to move between significant habitat areas of the Santa Cruz Mountain foothills.

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

Consistent with **Goal 2.4 Build Trails**, the proposed project will construct 2.1 miles of Ridge Trail consisting of a Highway 17 overcrossing and connector trail, extending from the overcrossing's western end point to the existing Serenity-Aquinas trail in El Sereno Open Space Preserve.

Consistent with **Goal 3.2 Restore or Enhance Habitats**, the proposed project provides a safe wildlife corridor across Highway 17 connecting the Santa Cruz Mountains and the Diablo Range.

CEQA COMPLIANCE:

On May 22, 2024, Midpen selected the Northern Trail Crossing Alternative and the Wildlife Undercrossing for advancement to advanced engineering and design. On August 28, 2024, Midpen adopted the Highway 17 Wildlife and Regional Trail Crossings and Trail Connections Project Initial Study with Mitigated Negative Declaration/Environmental Assessment with Finding of No Significant Impact (IS-MND/EA) and the Mitigation Monitoring and Reporting Plan., and approved the Highway 17 Wildlife and Regional Trail Crossings and Trail Connections Project. The proposed project is a component of the larger project analyzed in the IS-MND/EA. The overcrossing component of the proposed project is identified in the IS-MND/EA as the "Build Alternative with Northern Crossing." Staff concurs that there is no substantial evidence that the proposed project will have a significant effect on the environment.

The IS-MND/EA indicates that the proposed project would not have a significant effect on the environment for the following reasons:

- The proposed project would have no effect on agriculture and forestry resources, mineral resources, and public services.
- The proposed project would have less than significant effects on aesthetics, air quality, cultural resources, energy, geology and soils, greenhouse gas emissions, hazards and hazardous materials, hydrology and water quality, land use and planning, noise, population and housing, recreation, transportation, Tribal Cultural Resources, utilities and service systems, and wildfire.

- The project will implement avoidance and minimization measures for the following less than significant impact areas: aesthetics, cultural resources, paleontological, biological, and Tribal Cultural Resources.
- With implementation of mitigation measures MM-BIO-01 (Mitigation for Wetlands and Waters) and MM-BIO-02 (Mitigation for California Red-Legged Frog), the proposed project will have less than significant effects to biological resources.

With implementation of the project's avoidance, minimization, and mitigation measures, environmental effects will be less than significant. Staff recommends that the Conservancy find that the project as mitigated avoids, reduces or mitigates the potentially significant environmental effects to a level of less-than-significant and that there is no substantial evidence that the project will have a significant effect on the environment.

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