

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
March 25, 2004

HAMMOND COASTAL TRAIL: WIDOW WHITE CREEK TRAIL AND BYPASS

File No. 04-007
Project Manager: Su Corbaley

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$100,000 to the Redwood Community Action Agency to plan and design a section of the Hammond Coastal Trail connecting the northern and southern segments of the trail between Letz Avenue and Murray Road in McKinleyville, County of Humboldt.

LOCATION: West of Highway 1, between Letz Avenue and Murray Road, and along Widow White Creek, adjacent to the Mad River Estuary in McKinleyville, Humboldt County (Exhibit 1)

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Public Access

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: Project Location
- Exhibit 2: Site Map
- Exhibit 3: Proposed Trail Segments
- Exhibit 4: Letters of Support

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31000 *et seq.* of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed one hundred thousand dollars (\$100,000) to the Redwood Community Action Agency to design a segment of the Hammond Coastal Trail to include the Widow White Creek pedestrian interpretive corridor trail and bypass trail for the purpose of connecting its northern and southern segments and creating 5.5 miles of continuous trail from Clam Beach County Park to the Mad River. Prior to disbursement of any funds, the Executive Officer shall approve in writing a work plan, budget and schedule, and any contractors to be employed in these tasks.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the State Coastal Conservancy hereby finds that:

1. The proposed Hammond Trail project is consistent with the purposes and criteria set forth in Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.
 2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
 3. The Redwood Community Action Agency is a private nonprofit organization existing under Section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, and whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.
 4. The proposed project will serve greater than local needs.”
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PROJECT SUMMARY:

The Hammond Trail runs along a portion of the abandoned Little River and Hammond Railroad properties. The railroad line originally traveled from the North Spit of Humboldt Bay to Crannell (between McKinleyville and Trinidad), but never connected as far to the east as Arcata or as far south as Eureka and Fortuna. The ultimate goal of the Conservancy, Humboldt County, and the Redwood Community Action Agency is trail completion from Fortuna to Trinidad, linking the major coastal communities. As part of the California Coastal Trail, the Hammond Trail is designed for non-motorized commuter travel as well as recreational use, and provides the only north-south access over the Mad River west of State Route 101.

The proposed authorization would enable the Redwood Community Action Agency (RCAA) to prepare design and environmental documentation for approximately 2,200 feet of the Hammond Coastal Trail in McKinleyville, Humboldt County. At present, the Hammond Trail consists of two discontinuous segments extending from Clam Beach County Park to Letz Avenue and from Murray Road to the Mad River (Exhibit 2). Between these two segments is a gap known locally in Humboldt County as the “Hole in the Hammond.” Filling the Hole in the Hammond will enable RCAA to achieve a longstanding goal for Humboldt County and the Conservancy of connecting the trail segments, allowing visitors to travel uninterrupted for 5.5 miles along the coast. The proposed project would include developing plans for two trails to complete the Hammond Trail: An interpretive low-impact trail adjacent to the Widow White Creek would be for pedestrian-only use during low water flow season, and a hard-paved year-round use trail that bypasses the creek would be provided for heavier impact users such as bicyclists and equestrians, as well as pedestrians during high water flow season. The project would occur in several phases, including:

1. Surveying: Assessment of trail corridors, review of trail opportunities and constraints, review of design options, survey of trail corridor along Widow White Creek trail easement (held by County of Humboldt).
2. Engineering Designs: Preparation of engineering plans for the Widow White Creek trail and for Caltrans pre-approval of a bypass segment along Highway 1.
3. Permitting: Preparation of full project permitting applications through the County of Humboldt Natural Resources and Planning Departments.
4. Development of an updated public informational brochure and trail signage.

The project will be carried out in consultation with the County of Humboldt Public Works and Natural Resources Departments and the McKinleyville Community Services District for the creek trail, and with Caltrans for issuance of a longitudinal encroachment permit for the bypass. The County of Humboldt owns a public access easement along the creek and will work with RCAA to prepare the survey for final design layout. The trail along Widow White Creek would begin on property owned by McKinleyville Community Services and continue within a Humboldt County easement adjacent to the creek. Widow White Creek drains to the Mad River Estuary, and flows perennially supporting a healthy coastal riparian system of alder and willow, and steelhead and Coho salmonids. The bypass trail would extend from Letz Avenue south to Murray Road within a Caltrans longitudinal encroachment along the west side of Highway 1. At Murray Road the bypass would turn west to connect with the existing southern segment of the Hammond Coastal Trail (Exhibit 3).

RCAA, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization based in Humboldt County, has been integrally involved in the construction of the Hammond Trail for many years, and has worked extensively with the County and the Community Services District to plan for this project.

Project History: The Conservancy has worked for more than a quarter of a century to assist with the development of the Hammond Trail:

- In 1978, the Conservancy awarded \$17,500 to Humboldt County to acquire the abandoned Hammond Railroad right-of-way between Murray Road and Clam Beach;
- In May 1982, the Conservancy awarded \$296,000 to Humboldt County to renovate an abandoned railroad bridge across the Mad River for use by hikers, bicyclists, and equestrians;
- In April 1987, the Conservancy awarded \$105,000 to the County to construct a one-mile extension from Hiller Road to Kelly Avenue; and awarded \$108,500 to RCAA to extend the trail between Knox Cove (near Kelly Avenue) to Murray Road, then north toward Widow White Creek (which RCAA completed by 1995), and to conduct a feasibility analysis of additional northward extension to Clam Beach County Park;
- In May 1997, the Conservancy awarded \$76,000 to RCAA to extend the trail another 2.25 miles north through Clam Beach County Park; and
- In June 2002, the Conservancy awarded \$71,000 to RCAA to plan and design a southern extension of the trail from the Mad River Bridge and to stabilize approximately 780 linear feet of Widow White Creek stream bank along the proposed interpretive trail corridor.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy		\$100,000
Matching contributions:		
Trail easements	60,000	
County of Humboldt Transportation	10,000	
In-kind (labor and equipment)	<u>9,000</u>	
Subtotal:		<u>79,000</u>
Total Project Cost		\$179,000

The anticipated funding source for this authorization would be from Proposition 40, the “California Clean Water, Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks and Coastal Protection Fund.” The project is consistent with this funding source in that it would be carried out consistent with the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, specifically with regard to public access and the development of land and water resources along the coast.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 9 (Sections 31400 *et seq.*) of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code. Section 31400 states the Legislature’s intent that the Conservancy have a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the state’s coastline. The goal of the proposed project is to connect the existing portions of the Hammond Coastal Trail, resulting in 5.5 miles of continuous California Coastal Trail. The proposed funding authorization is thus consistent with §31400.

Section 31400.3 allows the Conservancy to aid nonprofit organizations in establishing a system of public coastal accessways. RCAA, which will carry out the proposed project, is a private nonprofit organization existing under Section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, having among its principal charitable purposes the conservation of land for scientific, educational, scenic, or open space opportunities. The proposed funding authorization thus meets the requirement of §31400.3 to aid nonprofit organizations in establishing a system of public coastal accessways, and is thus consistent with this section.

The proposed project is also consistent with §31408(a), directing the Conservancy to coordinate the development of the California Coastal Trail, and §31409, which authorizes the Conservancy to award grants and provide assistance to establish and expand inland trail systems that may be linked to the California Coastal Trail.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):

Consistent with **Goal 1 Objective C** of the Conservancy’s Strategic Plan, the proposed project will increase newly constructed and improved Public Accessway opportunities by designing 2,200 feet of the California Coastal Trail, thereby connecting two currently noncontiguous trail segments and resulting in 5.5 miles of continuous trail.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted January 24, 2001, in the following respects:

Required Criteria

1. **Promotion of the Conservancy’s statutory programs and purposes:** See the “Consistency with Conservancy’s Enabling Legislation” section above.
2. **Consistency with purposes of the funding source:** See the “Project Financing” section above.

3. **Support of the public:** This project has broad public support and is endorsed by Senator Wesley Chesbro, Assemblymember Patty Berg, the City of Arcata, the McKinleyville Community Services District, the Humboldt Bay Bicycle Commuters Association, the Friends of the Hammond Trail, and individual members of the public. See letters of support in Exhibit 4.
4. **Location:** The project would be located within the coastal zone of McKinleyville, County of Humboldt. The Hammond Coastal Trail is part of the California Coastal Trail, from Clam Beach to the Mad River. The proposed project will facilitate connecting the northern and southern portions of the Hammond Coastal Trail at the gap known as the “Hole in the Hammond” from Letz Avenue to Murray Road.
5. **Need:** Presently, trail users must limit their use to either existing segment of the trail because there is no reasonable means for all users to travel the Hole in the Hammond. The project would fill the gap and would result in 5.5 miles of continuous coastal access from Clam Beach County Park south to the Mad River Bridge.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** Humboldt County, with its beautiful scenery of vast beaches and panoramic bluffs and mountains, is a recreational destination for many visitors from within the State and the nation, particularly given its proximity to several State and National parks and recreation areas (*e.g.*, Humboldt Redwoods State Park, Redwood National Park). Furthermore, the ocean and rivers serve the student population drawn to Humboldt State University. To promote the Hammond Coastal Trail to visitors, RCAA has published a free brochure that contains general information for visitors about some of the exciting features found along the trail, and the trail’s popularity is evidenced by its selection as the “Best Place to Ride a Bike” and the “Second Best Place to Walk or Jog,” in the 1997 Eureka Times Standard’s annual “Best of the North Coast” poll. The proposed project thus has regional, state, and national interest.

Additional Criteria

11. **Innovation:** This project provides a unique opportunity to develop a pedestrian trail within a natural ecosystem and exhibit interpretive and educational information about the system for the visitor. Widow White Creek supports sensitive salmonid species, steelhead trout and Coho; providing interpretive information about these species’ life-needs offers an excellent educational opportunity to local schools and visitors unfamiliar with the salmonids’ special habitat requirements.
12. **Readiness:** The RCAA and the County are poised to conduct the proposed project, and have garnered widespread support and participation (see the “Project Support” section above).
13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** The Conservancy has a long history of assisting development of the Hammond Trail, as detailed under the “Project History” section above. This action would further existing goals for the Hammond Trail project specifically, and for public access in the region generally, as well as helping the planning and development of the California Coastal Trail.
15. **Cooperation:** The proposed project is another example of the cooperative effort among the Conservancy, RCAA, and the County to develop the Hammond Coastal Trail.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

This project is consistent with the *Humboldt County General Plan, Volume II, McKinleyville Area Plan of the Humboldt County Local Coastal Program* (certified January 7, 1982), Section 4.54, which recommends improvement to the existing trail along Widow White Creek to accommodate pedestrian and equestrian travel. This section further states that the development of the California Coastal Trail should follow recommendations of the adopted County Trails Plan, which in turn indicates that in the McKinleyville Planning Area the trail would follow the old Hammond Railroad right-of-way to the Mad River.

Planning, designing, and developing a Hammond Coastal Trail link from Letz Avenue to Murray Road will facilitate trail augmentation and use, will add to the establishment of foot trails along the Widow White Creek, and will follow the proposed Coastal Trail layout in the Trails Plan. This project is thus consistent with and will facilitate the implementation of the relevant portions of the Humboldt County General Plan for the City of McKinleyville.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The planning and design of the Widow White Creek trail and the bicycle/equestrian segments of the Hammond Coastal Trail is statutorily exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) under 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15262, in that it involves only planning studies and feasibility analysis for possible future actions which the agency has not approved, adopted, or funded. Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon project authorization.