

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
June 30, 2004

**PILLAR POINT BLUFF ACQUISITION AND TRAIL PLANNING**

File No. 04-026  
Project Manager: Marina Cazorla

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorize disbursement to the Peninsula Open Space Trust (POST) of up to \$1,000,000 towards its acquisition of the Strickler Property at Pillar Point Bluff, and up to \$85,000 for the planning and design of a 0.7-mile portion of the Coastal Trail.

**LOCATION:** Pillar Point Bluff, just north of Half Moon Bay, San Mateo County Coast

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Site Reservation and Public Access

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**EXHIBITS**

- Exhibit 1: Regional location map
  - Exhibit 2: Site map and aerial photograph
  - Exhibit 3: Site photographs
  - Exhibit 4: Letters of Support
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**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 million, (\$1,000,000) to the Peninsula Open Space Trust (POST) towards its acquisition of the Strickler Property at Pillar Point Bluff (San Mateo County Assessor Parcel No. 037-300-080) located in San Mateo County, as shown on Exhibits 1 and 2 to the accompanying staff recommendation. The State Coastal Conservancy further authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed eighty-five thousand dollars (\$85,000) for the planning and design of a 0.7 mile portion of the Coastal Trail. These authorizations are subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the Conservancy’s disbursement of acquisition funds, POST shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy all relevant acquisition documents, including but not limited to appraisals, agreement of purchase and sale, environmental assessments, escrow instructions, and documents of title.

2. Prior to the disbursement of the trail planning and design funds, POST shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy a work program, budget, schedule for the completion of the trail planning and design, and qualifications of any contractors or subcontractors to be employed to carry out the work program.
3. POST shall pay no more than fair market value for the property, as established in an appraisal approved by the Executive Officer of the Conservancy.
4. Conservancy funding shall be acknowledged by erecting and maintaining a sign on the property, the design and location of which shall be reviewed and approved by the Executive Officer.
5. POST shall permanently dedicate the blufftop portion of the property for the preservation of open space lands, natural resource protection, and public recreation by an offer to dedicate or other appropriate instrument or instruments approved by the Executive Officer, in accordance with Public Resources Code Section 31116(b).
6. POST shall seek funding for construction of coastal and vertical public access trails. If construction funding is obtained, POST shall construct trails within a reasonable time and maintain them until the property is conveyed to an appropriate entity for long-term stewardship.
7. The Coastal Trail Plan for the subject property shall be consistent with the Conservancy's "Standards and Recommendations for Design and Location of Accessways."

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 project is consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, specifically Chapter 8 (Sections 31350-31356) regarding reservation of significant coastal resource areas, Chapter 9 (31400-31400.3) regarding public access to the coast, and Section 31111.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
3. The Peninsula Open Space Trust is a 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."

**PROJECT SUMMARY:**

The proposed project consists of a grant of up to \$1,000,000 to the Peninsula Open Space Trust (POST) to acquire the 119-acre Strickler property located along Pillar Point Bluff on the San Mateo County coast (Exhibit 1). The project will protect prime coastal recreational, wetland and scenic resources. An additional \$85,000 grant would fund planning and design of a 0.7-mile portion of the Coastal Trail on the Pillar Point Bluff property.

POST would acquire this property with the intent of managing it for public use until it can be transferred to an appropriate public entity for long-term stewardship. As a condition of the Conservancy's grant, POST will permanently dedicate for open space protection and public recreation the approximately 90-acre blufftop area where the Coastal Trail will eventually be located. Given current budget constraints of public agencies, POST expects to own the property for a minimum of three to five years, and is working to proceed with Coastal Trail development and habitat restoration.

The blufftop area is accessible from both Seal Cove and Princeton Harbor (see Exhibit 2) and is already popular with hikers who use existing footpaths crossing the property. However, severe erosion problems on blufftop edges pose risks for hikers and are detrimental to habitat value. A well-planned, safe Coastal Trail with erosion control measures in place would be of great public benefit, and would minimize impacts on the property's coastal habitat. In addition, the Conservancy identified the design and construction of a trail on the landward portion of the Fitzgerald Marine reserve as a priority action in its 2002 report, *Completing the California Coastal Trail* (page 47, #4), a goal which will be partially fulfilled with this grant. This grant will therefore enable POST to complete a plan for the Coastal Trail, trails connecting the property to public roads, and possibly trails connecting to the Fitzgerald Marine Reserve's beach areas. As part of the trail planning and design process, POST will plan for a small staging and eight-car parking area. Currently, visitors are parking in a nearby neighborhood and crossing other private properties to reach the project area. The new parking area would thus help to minimize habitat impacts and disturbance to nearby property owners. Under the terms of the grant, POST has agreed to open the trail to the public as soon as it is completed.

**Site Description:** The Pillar Point Bluff property is located in the coastal zone just north of Pillar Point, a small peninsula that extends into the ocean north of Half Moon Bay. The 119-acre property is rectangular in shape, bounded by Half Moon Bay Airport to the east, residential lots of Seal Cove to the north, a trailer park and privately owned vacant agricultural lot to the south, and approximately 2,500 feet of shoreline to the west. The intertidal zone and offshore area immediately adjacent to the property are part of San Mateo County's Fitzgerald Marine Reserve, designated as a Marine Life Refuge and an Area of Special Biological Significance by the State of California. The property's blufftops provide excellent views of coastal tidepools and beaches to the west, and of the mountain ridges and picturesque agricultural lands of the Rancho Corral de Tierra property to the east.

The majority of the Pillar Point Bluff property is zoned Planned Agricultural District (PAD). The relatively flat, approximately 29-acre section on the eastern side of the property is zoned as M-1/DR (Light Industrial). The entire property is within the Design Review (DR) and CD (Coastal Development) overlay districts, as well as part of the scenic corridor designation of Cabrillo Highway One. The property's blufftop portion contains one density credit that could

have been developed into a site for a large home. The flat area, since it is zoned Light Industrial, could have accommodated warehouses and other commercial development.

The main topographic feature of the property is a prominent ridge that runs across the entire property parallel to the coastline at a maximum elevation of 170 feet. The west side of the ridge is a cliff that drops down steeply to the ocean. Eastward, the property flattens along Airport Street at its eastern edge. The striking topographic difference between the ridge and the flatlands is the result of the Seal Cove fault trace, part of the active San Gregorio Fault Zone. The ridge is also characterized by an unusual series of parallel lesser ridges and troughs, some of which contain water seasonally.

A wetland area on the flat eastern part of the property near Airport Street has been documented to contain several wetland indicator plants, including species of the Cyperaceae (sedge) and Juncaceae (rush) families, with heavy stands of Pacific silverweed (*Potentilla anserina pacifica*), California blackberry (*Rubus ursinus*), common willow herb (*Epilobium ciliatum*) and willow dock (*Rumex salicifolius*). The blufftop area contains a willow riparian area, coastal scrub, and perennial spring-fed pond within a swale along the bluffs. There is a large meadow area dominated by pampas grass at the southwest blufftop corner of the property. Pampas grass, as well as highly invasive cape ivy, is also present in and around a former reservoir at the flat northeastern corner of the property. POST is working with Go Native Nurseries in Pacifica to develop a land management plan to control invasive species and prevent degradation of the wetland area, restore native plants, and control erosion problems on the property. The property may provide habitat for the endangered San Francisco garter snake and California red-legged frog, as well as for the special status salt marsh common yellowthroat, loggerhead shrike, and San Francisco dusky-footed woodrat.

There are no buildings on the Pillar Point Bluff property, but there are remnants of former agricultural operations on the flat portion of the property, including the foundation of a dairy barn, a former reservoir, old dirt roads, and fallow farmland. There are also four water wells on the property, including three unused agricultural wells and one active well on a very small inholding owned by the Coastside County Water District. POST recently completed the first phase of an environmental assessment for the property that indicated the potential presence of some contamination on or near the property, though results were not conclusive. Therefore, a second, more detailed assessment will be performed. An access easement from Airport Street provides access to this well parcel. Another prominent man-made impact on the property is an extensive network of trails along the bluff top and cliff edge that can be accessed from Princeton Harbor and Seal Cove. There is currently no easily accessible path to the beach due to the steepness and highly erosive nature of the bluff edges.

**Project History:** Originally part of the historic 1839 Rancho Corral de Tierra Spanish land grant, Pillar Point Bluff was used as a dairy farm during the 1900s. The property was purchased by real estate developers in 1986 with eventual office park development in mind. Later, two of the original partners transferred interest in the property to multiple relatives and parties. In recent years, one of the owners contacted various open space organizations regarding the property, and in April 2004 POST agreed to purchase it for \$2.7 million, well below the \$3.8 appraised value.

**PROJECT FINANCING:**

Coastal Conservancy – acquisition	\$1,000,000
Coastal Conservancy – trail planning	\$85,000
Peninsula Open Space Trust	<u>\$1,700,000</u>
<b>Total Project Cost</b>	<b>\$2,785,000</b>

The expected source of Conservancy funds for this project is the FY 2002/03 appropriation to the Conservancy from Proposition 40 (California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhoods and Coastal Protection Act of 2002), which gives priority to projects funded with matching funds from other sources. POST is contributing \$1.7 million dollars to the acquisition of this property, although POST will attempt to recoup some or all of this contribution with additional grants from other public agencies in relation to the flat, eastern portion of the property.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:**

This project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapters 8 and 9 (Sections 31350-31356 and 31400-31409, respectively) of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding reservation of significant coastal resource areas for public use and enjoyment, and public access; and Section 31111.

In Chapter 8, Section 31350 states the Legislature's policy of reserving for public use and enjoyment significant coastal resource sites that would otherwise be lost. Section 31351(a) directs the Conservancy to cooperate with nonprofit organizations and other public agencies to ensure reservation of property for purposes of Division 21. Section 31352(a) authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to nonprofit organizations to enable the organization to "acquire, hold, protect, or use" real property for a purpose provided in Section 31351, where the organization is "unable, due to limited financial resources or other circumstances" to undertake these activities on its own. Having invested \$1.7 million of its own private funds to purchase the property, POST intends to hold the property until it can be transferred to an appropriate public agency. Consistent with Chapter 8, the proposed Conservancy grant would enable POST to protect the property while holding onto fee interests as needed to realize its conservation goals.

Under Chapter 9, the Conservancy is authorized in Section 31400 to have a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the state's coastline. Section 31400.1 authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to a nonprofit organization to acquire land, and develop and manage it for public access purposes to and along the coast. Section 31400.2 authorizes the Conservancy to provide up to the total cost of the acquisition of interests in lands and the initial development of public accessways to and along the state's coastline by a nonprofit organization. Section 31400.3 allows the Conservancy to provide assistance as is required to aid nonprofit organizations in establishing a system of coastal accessways. Lastly, Section 31408(a) provides for the Conservancy to coordinate the development of a California Coastal Trail. The proposed project is consistent with all of these sections, in that the proposed Conservancy grant will enable POST, a nonprofit organization, to acquire a property that will provide 0.7 miles of potential coastal trail segment where no legal public access currently exists. Through this grant,

the Conservancy would be facilitating in the establishment and development of new coastal accessways and the Coastal Trail.

The trail planning and design aspect of the proposed project is consistent with Section 31111, which authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to public agencies and non-profit organizations to undertake plans and feasibility studies. The proposed trail planning and design for a coastal trail on the property would facilitate the opening of the property for public access and recreation in the shortest possible timeframe.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S STANDARDS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACCESSWAY LOCATION AND DEVELOPMENT:**

Consistent with Standard No. 1, the Pillar Point Bluff Coastal Trail would be designed to minimize alteration of natural landforms and be subordinate to the setting's character. The trail planning process will assure that the trail is designed in a way that prevents hazards to the land and to public safety (Standard Nos. 1 and 2), ensures the privacy of private landowners (Standard Nos. 1 and 4), and protects environmentally sensitive habitats (Standard Nos. 1 and 5). Consistent with Standard No. 8, the proposed project would help to establish a trail on an ocean front parcel that will connect with other parks on the shore, in particular the County of San Mateo's Fitzgerald Marine Reserve. Further consistent with Standard No. 8, the planning process would be undertaken in part to eliminate existing trails on geologically unstable and erosive soils.

**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 would provide plans and designs necessary to construct 0.7 miles of the Coastal Trail on the Pillar Point Bluff property.

Consistent with **Goal 1 Objective D**, the proposed project would result in the acquisition of a new 0.7 mile Coastal Trail segment on a blufftop area.

Consistent with **Goal 2 Objective A**, the proposed project would acquire a property to increase public access and protect open space and views.

Consistent with **Goal 5 Objective A**, the proposed project would preserve approximately 119 acres of environmentally sensitive habitat on Pillar Point Bluff by restricting use of the property and designing a trail alignment that will avoid and minimize impacts to such areas.

**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:** The proposed project is supported by State Senator Byron Sher and Assemblymember Gene Mullin, the Midpeninsula Regional Open Space District, and the Committee for the Green Foothills. Letters of support are attached as Exhibit 4.
4. **Location:** The proposed project would be located within the coastal zone of the County of San Mateo.
5. **Need:** If this property were not acquired by POST, development would likely occur, impacting coastal habitat and reducing the potential for Coastal Trail access. The Pillar Point Bluff property is already heavily used, evidenced by a network of informal trails. Such uncontrolled access contributes to soil erosion and damage to sensitive habitat, which will be addressed through appropriate trail planning and design.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** As discussed in greater detail in the "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation" section above, Pillar Point Bluff is a scenic and recreational resource of regional and statewide importance. Completion of the Coastal Trail is a major goal of a number of state agencies, including the Department of Parks and Recreation and the California Coastal Commission.

**Additional Criteria**

7. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The project would develop the Coastal Trail, protect coastal resources, preserve scenic views and open space and preclude development.
8. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
9. **Readiness:** As discussed above, POST has entered into a purchase agreement with the sellers of the property, and POST will initiate planning and design of the Coastal Trail segment after the grant is approved.

**CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:**

The proposed project would further many policies of the June 1998 County of San Mateo Local Coastal Plan. Some of the most directly relevant are listed below:

**Sensitive Habitats Component**

- 7.3 Prohibit any land use or development that would have significant adverse impact on sensitive habitat areas.
- 7.31 Restrict pedestrian traffic in bluff and cliff areas and on faces to a limited number of well-defined trails which avoid seabird nesting and roosting sites.

Visual Resources Component

- 8.15 Prevent development from substantially blocking views to or along the shoreline from coastal roads, roadside rests and vista points, recreation areas, trails, coastal accessways, and beaches.
- 8.4 Prohibit development on bluff faces except public access stairways where deemed necessary and erosion control structures which are in conformity with coastal policies on access and erosion.

Shoreline Access Component

- 10.9 Provide safe access to shoreline destinations; discourage public use of hazardous trails; protect sensitive habitat.
- 10.12 Locate shoreline access within existing or new residential areas in the least disruptive manner. In all areas where topography permits, provide shoreline access for the disabled without altering major landforms.

Recreation/Visitor-Serving Facilities Component

- 11.9 Protect suitable oceanfront land for public recreation.
- 11.13 Establish a trails program for the Coastal Zone with the objective of connecting major shoreline to inland park and recreation facilities and trails, and linking existing and proposed recreation facilities along the coast.

The proposed project will protect sensitive habitat by providing and directing public access along a Coastal Trail such that environmentally sensitive areas are avoided, scenic views are protected, blufftop erosion decreased, and the public has access to the shoreline for recreation.

**COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:**

Under 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15313, projects are exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act for “acquisition of land for fish and wildlife conservation purposes...and preserving access to public lands and waters where the purpose of the acquisition is to preserve the land in its natural condition.” Section 15325 exempts projects that consist of “transfers of ownership in interests in land in order to preserve open space, habitat, or historical resources.” The proposed grant for acquisition is exempt under both sections because it is a transfer of ownership in land to preserve open space and habitat and is an acquisition of lands for conservation purposes.

The trail planning and design portion of the project is also statutorily exempt from the provisions of the California Environmental Quality Act pursuant to 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15262, because the project involves only feasibility and planning studies for possible future actions which have yet to be approved or adopted. As required by this Section, POST will involve the consideration of environmental factors in the planning and design of the Coastal Trail. This project does not include the funding of any construction activities. Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon approval of the action.