

**LAGUNA COAST WILDERNESS PARK**

**COASTAL CONSERVANCY**

Staff Recommendation  
March 10, 2005

**LAGUNA COAST WILDERNESS PARK**

**THE JAMES AND ROSEMARY NIX NATURE CENTER  
INTERPRETIVE EXHIBITS**

File No. 05-008  
Project Manager: Deborah Ruddock

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$295,440 to the Laguna Canyon Foundation for final design, fabrication and installation of interpretive exhibits for the James and Rosemary Nix Nature Center in the Laguna Coast Wilderness Park (LCWP).

**LOCATION:** County of Orange (Exhibit 1)

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Access

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**EXHIBITS**

- Exhibit 1: Project location map
  - Exhibit 2: South Coast Regional Wilderness map
  - Exhibit 3: Concept Plan (2 pp)
  - 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 Section 31400 of the Public Resources Code::

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed two hundred and ninety-five thousand four hundred and forty dollars (\$295,440) to the Laguna Canyon Foundation for final design, fabrication and installation of interpretive exhibits for the James and Rosemary Nix Nature Center in the Laguna Coast Wilderness Park (LCWP), subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to disbursement of any funds, the Laguna Canyon Foundation shall submit for review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy:
  - a) Evidence that the Foundation has obtained all necessary permits and approvals

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- and has conducted all necessary environmental review.
- b) A final work plan (including the names of any subcontractors to be used in the completion of the project), and a project schedule and budget.
  - c) Evidence that the grantee has secured the necessary funding to complete this phase of the project.
2. The Foundation shall acknowledge Conservancy and “Proposition 12” funding by erecting and maintaining signs on the properties, the design and location of which has been approved by the Executive Officer.

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 the purposes and criteria set forth in Public Resources Code Sections 31400-31409 regarding development of a system of public accessways to along the State’s coastline.
  2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
  3. The Laguna Canyon Foundation is a nonprofit organization, existing under the provisions of Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code, whose purposes, which include the preservation, restoration or enhancement of land for habitat protection, public access and recreation, are consistent with Division 21 of the California Public Resources Code.”
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### **PROJECT SUMMARY:**

The proposed authorization would enable the Conservancy to assist the Laguna Canyon Foundation with final design, fabrication and installation of interpretive exhibits for the James and Rosemary Nix Nature Center (the “Nix Center”) located in Little Sycamore Canyon at Laguna Coast Wilderness Park (LCWP). LCWP trails link with others in the SCW to provide public access from inland areas to the coast and along the coast in southern Orange County.

The Nix Center’s interpretive exhibits will support the Laguna Canyon Foundation’s educational programs on the science, culture and art associated with the unique coastal canyons of the LCWP and the greater 17,000-acre South Coast Wilderness (SCW) regional system of parks and preserves (Exhibit 2). The exhibits will include interactive displays, interpretive panels, fossils embedded in rockwork, audio recordings, projected images, art and artifacts.

Interpretive exhibit deliverables covered by the Conservancy grant would include scaled design drawings, plans and specification; a location, fabrication and installation plan; and a detailed budget and schedule. Fabrication deliverables would include off-site fabrication and preparation of installation plans for each proposed exhibit or group of exhibits and a maintenance manual and parts list. Finally, the Conservancy grant would cover shipping, assembly and installation costs.

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The Laguna Canyon Foundation, a 501c(3) non-profit corporation, has been a strong advocate for creating the LCWP, the centerpiece of the SCW. Foundation directors represent the communities surrounding the parkland – Aliso Viejo, Irvine, Laguna Beach, Laguna Woods, Leisure World, Laguna Greenbelt, Laguna Canyon Conservancy, Village Laguna and individuals committed to preserving these heritage canyons. The Foundation, since its formation, has raised more than \$3 million in private funding and partnered with public agencies for more than \$8 million in funding.

**Site Description:** The interpretive exhibits will be installed at the James and Rosemary Nix Nature Center, located in Little Sycamore Canyon in the LCWP. Little Sycamore Canyon is located at the crossroads of the 17,000-acre SCW regional system of parks and preserves encompassing numerous coastal canyons and coastal watersheds (Exhibit 2). The Nix Center property is owned and managed by Orange County and is accessible from the newly re-designed Laguna Canyon Road, which connects Interstates 5 and 405 and the Route 73 toll road to the Pacific Coast Highway. Little Sycamore Canyon offers a multitude of coastal canyon habitats – oak woodlands, riparian, coastal sage scrub, and native grasslands as well as geological formations and access to the only natural lakes in Orange County. It is part of the Laguna Canyon watershed, a coastal watershed. LCWP as a whole is part of the South Coast Natural Communities Conservation Program (NCCP). The area surrounding the center site in Little Sycamore Canyon includes a breathtaking natural bowl with vistas of caves and towering cliffs.

**Project History:** In 1998 the County of Orange approved the general development and resource management plans for LCWP, which called for construction of a nature center in Little Sycamore Canyon. In 2000, Leisure World residents Rosemary and Jim Nix launched fund raising for construction of the center with a donation of \$500,000 to the Laguna Canyon Foundation. The Foundation and the County of Orange subsequently agreed to partner to raise funds, design and build the center and to name it the James and Rosemary Nix Nature Center. In the formal agreement entered into with the County, the Foundation has agreed to assume responsibility for administering the nature center's interpretive exhibit program, including project funding and design, construction and installation of exhibits. To date the Foundation has spent \$54,600 on exhibit planning, concept development, and preliminary design. Of this amount \$24,000 came from new restricted private donations, and the balance, \$30,600, came from the Foundation's existing unrestricted private donations. The Foundation has received a pledge for \$50,000 to set up an endowment program for ongoing maintenance and administration of the exhibits.

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**PROJECT FINANCING:**

(1) Preliminary design

Laguna Canyon Foundation	
Restricted donations	24,000
Unrestricted donations	<u>30,600</u>
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>\$ 54,560</b>

(2) Final design and fabrication

Coastal Conservancy	\$186,400
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>\$240,960</b>

(3) Shipping, assembly and installation

Coastal Conservancy	\$109,040
<b>Subtotal</b>	<b>\$350,000</b>

(4) Operations and maintenance endowment

Laguna Canyon Foundation	\$ 50,000
Total Coastal Conservancy (2), (3)	\$295,440
Total Laguna Canyon Foundation (1), (4)	<u>\$104,560</u>
<b>Total Project Cost</b>	<b>\$ 400,000</b>

The anticipated source of funding for this project is a specific FY 2004-2005 budget appropriation to the Conservancy of funds from the “Safe Neighborhood Parks, Clean Water, Clean Air, and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2000” (Proposition 12). 2004 budget provision 80.01.030 re-appropriates Proposition 12 funds originally appropriated to the Conservancy for acquisition projects within the Laguna Coast Wilderness Park (subdivision (g) of Section 5096.352 of the Public Resources Code) to “projects for the South Coast Wilderness System of coastal canyons and watersheds in South Orange County, including, but not limited to, properties in Laguna Coast Wilderness Park and Aliso and Wood Canyons Wilderness Park...” In re-interpreting Proposition 12, the Legislature relied on bond text (Section 5096.3075 of the Public Resources Code) that permits expansion of the purposes for which Proposition 12 funding can be used, as long as a finding can be made that appropriated funds are in excess of the total needed for specified projects.

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In January 2004, after consultation with local agency and non-profit partners and area legislators, the Conservancy board made a finding that funds remaining of the original Proposition 12 appropriation to the Conservancy (Section 5096.352 (g) *Laguna Coast Wilderness Park*) were in excess of the total needed for future acquisition projects within the LCWP. In August 2004, the legislature approved the budget provision previously mentioned allowing the Conservancy to fund projects in addition to acquisitions that are located in the South Coast Wilderness system that includes the LCWP. The proposed project, design, fabrication and installation of interpretive exhibits for a nature center to be located in the LCWP, is thus consistent with the Conservancy appropriation and the funding source.

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

The proposed project is consistent with the purposes and criteria set forth in Public Resources Code Sections 31400-31409 regarding development of a system of public accessways to along the State's coastline.

Consistent with Section 31400.2, staff recommends approval of this project after evaluating the total amount of Proposition 12 funding available for Conservancy appropriation for acquisition and other projects in the SCW (see Project Financing Section), the fiscal resources of the grantee, the urgency of the project relative to other eligible projects (see discussion below), and the application of factors prescribed by the Conservancy for the purpose of determining project eligibility and priority. After approval of the proposed authorization, sufficient funds would be available from the specific budget appropriation for the SCW to cover all priority acquisitions in this area. The proposed authorization would provide funds necessary to complete the project while leveraging matching funds from the Foundation. The project already is underway, whereas other potential projects suitable for Proposition 12 funding remain under development. Lastly, as explained below, the project is consistent with the Conservancy's project selection criteria.

Section 31400.3 permits the Conservancy to provide such assistance as is required to aid non-profit organizations in establishing a system of public coastal accessways, and related functions necessary to meet the objectives of Division 21. Further under this section, funded projects must serve greater than local needs. Consistent with this section, the proposed authorization to the Laguna Canyon Foundation, a non-profit organization, will assist with development, fabrication and installation of interpretive exhibits for a nature center and park headquarters located at the entrance to the Laguna Coast Wilderness Park. LCWP trails link with others in the SCW to provide public access from inland areas to the coast and along the coast. The Nix Center will be a staging and rest area for LCWP visitors, supported by the educational resources of the interpretive exhibit program. The center will serve a regional population of three million, as well as the large population of tourists that flock to Orange County beach communities each year.

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

**Public Access Goal 2, Objective D, Strategy (c) Support regional environmental education centers:** The proposed project will assist with the design, fabrication and installation of educational interpretive exhibits for a nature center intended to serve the needs of visitors to the

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LCWP and the SCW, a regional system of parks and preserves.

### **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 Conservancy has received letters of support from State Sen. John Campbell, Assemblyman Chuck DeVore, Orange County Supervisor Tom Wilson, the cities of Laguna Beach and Laguna Woods and Laguna Greenbelt, Inc. (Exhibit 4).
4. **Location:** The proposed project will be located in the LCWP in Orange County. While the project itself is not located in the coastal zone, LCWP trails link with others in the SCW regional system of parks and preserves to provide public access from inland areas to the coast and along the coast. The Nix Center is designed to be a staging and rest area for LCWP and SCW visitors, functions supported by the educational resources of the interpretive exhibit program.
5. **Need:** Completing design, fabrication and installation of the interpretive exhibits in a timely manner will only be accomplished with Conservancy assistance.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The center and its interpretive exhibit program are intended to serve a regional population of three million Orange County residents as well as the large population of tourists that flock to area beaches each year. A handicapped-accessible loop trail, funded by the Irvine Ranch Land Reserve Trust, will provide universal access to the wilderness park experience.

#### **Additional Criteria**

12. **Readiness:** The grantee is ready to complete next phases of the project as soon as funding is available.
13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** The Coastal Conservancy has long assisted planning and restoration in the area of southern Orange County known as the South Coast Regional Wilderness. In the late 1970s, the Conservancy helped design the Aliso Greenbelt. Later, the Conservancy provided funding for restoration of habitat in the Laguna Lakes, Orange County's only natural freshwater lakes in what is now known as the Laguna Coast Wilderness Park (LCWP).

In 2002, the Coastal Conservancy worked with State Parks on disposition of the cottages at

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Crystal Cove. Along the Laguna coast, the Conservancy has assisted with many beach access projects.

In 2002, the 10.6-acre Rossmoor parcel adjacent to LCWP north of Laguna Canyon Road became available under the terms of a settlement agreement between the City of Laguna Woods and the landowner. In May 2002, the Conservancy provided \$2,435,000 to the City of Laguna Woods to acquire the property for inclusion in the LCWP; the City acquired the property in 2003.

In March 2004, the Conservancy provided \$800,000 to the City of Laguna Beach to acquire the Trinity Broadcasting Network and Wainwright properties for addition to the LCWP. These acquisitions were completed in fall 2004. Also in March 2004, the Conservancy granted \$100,000 to the Laguna Canyon Foundation for final pre-project expenses related to future acquisitions in the South Coast Wilderness.

### **COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:**

In September 1998, the County of Orange issued a Mitigated Negative Declaration under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) for modification to the LCWP General Development Plan and the Resource Management Plan, which included construction of the interpretive center and a variety of other small structures at Little Sycamore Canyon. Relevant to the Conservancy's action, design and installation of the exhibits in the interpretive center are exempt pursuant to 14 Cal. Code Reg. § 15322 which exempts educational or training programs which involve physical changes in the interior of existing structures.

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