

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

June 16, 2005

ISLA VISTA BLUFFTOP VACANT PARCELS ACQUISITION

File No. 04-102

Project Manager: Mary Travis

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$300,000 to the County of Santa Barbara for the acquisition of three blufftop parcels on Del Playa Drive in Isla Vista.

LOCATION: Isla Vista, Santa Barbara County (Exhibit 1)

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Public Access

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Project Location and Site Map

Exhibit 2: Project Site

Exhibit 3: Letters of Support

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31400-31409 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed three hundred thousand dollars (\$300,000.00) to the County of Santa Barbara for the acquisition of three blufftop parcels on the 6700 block of Del Playa Drive in Isla Vista, as shown on Exhibit 1 to the accompanying staff recommendation. This authorization is subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to disbursement of any funds for acquisition of the property, the County of Santa Barbara shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy:
 - a. All relevant acquisition documents, including but not limited to the appraisal, environmental assessments, agreement of purchase and sale, escrow instructions, and documents of title necessary to the acquisition of the property.
 - b. Evidence satisfactory to the Executive Officer that the County of Santa Barbara has available all other funds necessary for acquisition of the three blufftop parcels.
 - c. A signing plan for the project acknowledging Conservancy participation.

2. The County of Santa Barbara shall pay no more than fair market value for the property, as established in an appraisal approved by the Executive Officer.
3. The property interests acquired under this authorization shall be managed and operated in a manner consistent with the purposes of open space and viewshed protection as well as public access and recreational use. The property shall be permanently dedicated to those purposes in accordance with Public Resources Code Section 31116(b) through the use of a deed restriction, irrevocable offer to dedicate, or other instrument acceptable to the Executive Officer.
4. Conservancy funding shall be acknowledged by erecting and maintaining a sign on the property, 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 in Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31400-31409) regarding public access to the coast.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
3. The proposed project will serve more than local public needs.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff is recommending that the Conservancy provide up to \$300,000 to the County of Santa Barbara (County) for the acquisition of three oceanfront parcels in the community of Isla Vista. This acquisition would culminate a dozen years of effort to provide much-needed coastal open space in Isla Vista, one of the most densely populated communities in California.

The subject parcels are three of five contiguous parcels, totaling .67 acre, located on the 6700 block of Del Playa Drive, which parallels the shoreline in Isla Vista (Exhibits 1 and 2). They afford panoramic views of the coastline, the ocean, and the Channel Islands—views that are not available from most of Del Playa Drive, which is largely built up with apartment buildings and single-family homes. Because the parcels lie between several publicly owned lots the County has long targeted them for acquisition. For the past four years the County has sought grants and internal funds to buy the parcels—which, like all buildable oceanfront land in Santa Barbara County, are expensive. In March 2005, with most of the necessary funding in hand, the County reached a deal with the landowner.

The acquisition of the last vacant blufftop lots on Del Playa Drive owned by a willing seller would accomplish several aims. Together with the adjacent publicly owned land, the parcels would form a two-acre park overlooking the ocean, near two heavily used beach accessways. Recreational open space is in great demand in Isla Vista, a high-density community of university students and low-income families, many of whom live in small apartments with little or no private yard space. Also, this acquisition would protect coastal views that would be lost if the parcels were developed. Finally, by precluding residential development on a blufftop that is subject to erosion, it would avoid the need for shoreline protection.

The County is eager to complete the acquisition within the next few months. If the Conservancy approves the proposed grant of \$300,000, the County would purchase three of the five parcels immediately using the Conservancy grant, a Caltrans EEMP grant, and a variety of other local sources. Shortly thereafter, using proceeds from the sale of two surplus County-owned lots, the County would acquire the remaining two parcels. Once acquired, the parcels would be maintained as open space by the Isla Vista Recreation and Parks District (IVRPD), which operates and maintains about 72 acres of parks in Isla Vista.

Site Description: Isla Vista is an unincorporated community surrounded on three sides by the University of California, Santa Barbara (UCSB); to the south is the Pacific Ocean. The project site, located on the seaward side of Del Playa Drive, is perched high on a grassy blufftop overlooking a sandy beach (Exhibits 1 and 2). On a street where coastal views are mostly blocked by residential development, this site offers unique and stunning views across the Santa Barbara Channel to the Channel Islands. There is no beach access from the property or from the adjacent County-owned lands, but two popular beach access stairways are nearby, at the foot of Camino Del Sur, to the east, and at Escondido Pass, to the west (see Exhibit 2). These stairways are used by both residents and visitors to Isla Vista and UCSB.

Project History: The UCSB campus has drawn tens of thousands of people to Isla Vista for decades. While the majority of residents are UCSB students, the community has attracted low-income families as well because of its large inventory of rental units and a vacancy rate that is much higher than that of neighboring Goleta or of Santa Barbara. Isla Vista lacks high-rise apartment buildings, but nevertheless its population density is very high. Parcel lots are typically small and often narrow, much of the housing consists of multi-unit apartment buildings, and overcrowding within residences is common, with two or more people per bedroom the norm. Many residents lack private yard space and depend on public parks for outdoor recreation.

Responding to the need for more open space in Isla Vista, residents approved the formation of the Isla Vista Redevelopment Agency and a Redevelopment Project Area in 1991. The primary purpose of this redevelopment project was to purchase remaining undeveloped blufftop properties to preserve as open space. The 1991 advisory vote allocated approximately three million dollars for the project area, and between 1991 and 1994 fifteen parcels were purchased and permanently protected as open space. Some of the parcels were developed as stairways for public beach access, while others were developed for passive recreation. The latter include Pelican Park, at 6541 Del Playa Drive, where in 2000 the Conservancy helped fund access improvements and a blufftop erosion control demonstration project.

After its initial success, the County's blufftop acquisition program stalled for a time in the mid-1990s, but eventually it was reinvigorated, thanks in large part to the efforts of former Third District Supervisor Gail Marshall. After identifying a willing landowner on Del Playa Drive, the County set about securing the funds for acquisition. These parcels are most likely the last oceanfront lots the County will be able to buy in Isla Vista, since no other landowner is willing to sell to a public agency.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Phase I, acquisition of first three parcels:

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Coastal Conservancy	\$300,000
County of Santa Barbara (CREF, sale of County-owned surplus property)	735,650
IVRPD (Propositions 12 and 40)	50,000
Caltrans (EEMP)	244,350
Goleta Valley Land Trust	<u>175,000</u>
Total	\$1,505,000
Phase II , acquisition of last two parcels:	
County of Santa Barbara (sale of County-owned surplus property)	<u>\$1,004,700</u>
Total project cost for all five parcels	\$2,509,700

The expected source of Conservancy funds for this project is the FY 03/04 appropriation to the Conservancy from the California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhoods and Coastal Protection Act of 2002 (Proposition 40) for acquisition, development, rehabilitation, restoration, and protection of land and water resources in accordance with the provisions of the Conservancy's enabling legislation. As discussed below, the project is consistent with Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code. Consistent with Proposition 40, the proposed project includes matching funds from other sources. In this instance the Conservancy's contribution would be matched more than 7 to 1.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

This project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 9 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31400-31409), regarding public access and enjoyment of coastal resources. Section 31400 states the Legislature's intent that the Conservancy play a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the coast. Through the proposed authorization, the Conservancy would play a role in an acquisition that would expand opportunities for public access and passive recreation along the coast in Isla Vista, where such opportunities are sorely needed.

Section 31400.1 authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to public agencies and nonprofit organizations to acquire land for public access purposes that serve more than local public needs. Consistent with that section, the proposed grant would assist the County of Santa Barbara with an acquisition that will benefit Isla Vista residents as well as UCSB students, visitors to the campus, and visitors to Isla Vista beaches and parks.

Consistent with § 31400.2, staff recommends approval of this project after evaluating the amount of funding provided by the Conservancy in light of the total amount of available for coastal public accessway and urban waterfront projects, 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. Although the Conservancy may provide up to the total cost of acquisition of lands by a public agency, the proposed authorization would leverage matching funds by providing twelve percent of the amount needed to complete the acquisition of the five parcels.

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

Consistent with **Goal 2 Objective A** of the Conservancy's Strategic Plan, the proposed project entails acquisition of oceanfront property under threat of development in order to protect coastal open space and views and expand parkland within the largely low-income community of Isla Vista.

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 from the public:** The residents of Isla Vista have long supported the County's efforts to secure parks and open space in the community, as demonstrated by their 1991 vote to create the Isla Vista Redevelopment Agency and a Redevelopment Project Area. This particular project came about in part because of the efforts of former Third District Supervisor Gail Marshall. The Goleta Valley Land Trust, a local organization, has supported the project with a grant of \$175,000. The project also has the support of Assembly Member Pedro Nava and the Environmental Defense Center. Letters of support are attached as Exhibit 3.
4. **Location:** The proposed project site is located within the coastal zone of Santa Barbara County.
5. **Need:** The County has secured most of the funding needed for this acquisition. Still, a funding gap remains. The proposed Conservancy grant would provide the remaining funds needed for the project.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** In addition to serving the entire community of Isla Vista, where parkland and open space are in short supply, this project would benefit the tens of thousands of students and visitors who come to UCSB from all the state and the country.

Additional Criteria

7. **Urgency:** This is an opportunity to create a two-acre oceanfront park with magnificent ocean views, and it is probably the last opportunity the County will have to purchase coastal property in Isla Vista. If these lots are not acquired now, they will likely be sold for residential development and funding for the project will be lost.
9. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above.

12. **Readiness:** The County has obtained most of the funding needed and has negotiated a purchase agreement with the landowner. The County expects to be able to complete the acquisition of the first three lots by the end of June.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The proposed project is consistent with the County of Santa Barbara’s certified Local Coastal Program (LCP), specifically with policies relating to coastal access and recreation. Section 3.7.3 of the LCP states:

. . . County and State recreational demand projections indicate that facility deficiencies exist for most recreation activities. These deficiencies are expected to increase due to growth in population, tourism, and the popularity of many coastal dependent or related recreational activities. Consequently, a program of land acquisition and facility development needs to be implemented if demand for coastal recreation is to be satisfied.

This section also notes, “Current use of undeveloped coastal areas which are not in public ownership indicates that there is a public demand for recreational areas that may not require the full range of services supplied at existing beach parks.” The Del Playa Drive parcels, which do not provide beach access but would still allow the public to enjoy the coastline and ocean views, could be an example of such recreational areas. With respect to the specific project area, Policy 7-12 of the LCP states, “New opportunities for beach access and coastal recreation shall be provided in the Goleta planning area,” which includes Isla Vista.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The acquisition of the Isla Vista blufftop parcels is categorically exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to two sections of 14 Cal. Code of Regulations (CCR): Section 15325(f), because it is an acquisition of land for open space and park purposes, and CCR Section 15316, which exempts transfers of ownership of land in order to establish a park where the land is in a natural condition and the management plan for the park has not been prepared. Upon Conservancy approval of the proposed authorization, staff will file a Notice of Exemption for the project.