

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
September 8, 2005

PLEASANTON RIDGE REGIONAL PARK ACQUISITION

File No. 05-054
Project Manager: Brenda Buxton

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse \$400,000 to the East Bay Regional Park District for the acquisition of the 106-acre Vinson property to expand the Pleasanton Ridge Regional Park.

LOCATION: Pleasanton Ridge, Alameda County (Exhibit 1)

PROGRAM CATEGORY: San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: Project Location
 - Exhibit 2: Parcel Map
 - Exhibit 3: Photos of Project Site
 - 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 four hundred thousand dollars (\$400,000) to the East Bay Regional Park District (the District) for acquisition of the Vinson property, Alameda County Assessor’s Parcel Nos. 085A-3275-001-01 (all 40 acres), 085A-3275-001-02 (40-acre portion), and 085A-3250-002 (26-acre portion), as shown on Exhibit 2 to the accompanying staff recommendation, subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to disbursement of any Conservancy funds for acquisition of the property, the District shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (the Executive Officer) all relevant acquisition documents, including, but not limited to, an appraisal, agreement of purchase and sale, environmental assessments, escrow instructions and documents of title.

2. The District shall dedicate the property for natural resource protection, open space preservation and public access by an appropriate instrument approved by the Executive Officer.
3. The District shall pay no more than fair market value for the property, as established in an appraisal approved by the Conservancy's 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 reviewed and 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 Public Resources Code Sections 31160-31164 regarding the Conservancy's mandate to address the resource and recreational goals of the San Francisco Bay Area.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001."

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends authorization to disburse up to \$400,000 to the East Bay Regional Park District (the District) toward the acquisition of the 106-acre Vinson property, which is adjacent to the Pleasanton Ridge Regional Park in unincorporated Alameda County, just west of the City of Pleasanton (Exhibit 1).

Acquisition of the Vinson property is a priority for Conservancy assistance because it will accomplish the following:

- *Protect wildlife habitat and a wildlife corridor from development:* The hills within the Vinson property, with both gentle and steep slopes, provide diverse wildlife habitats including riparian wetlands and creeks, oak/bay woodlands, mixed chaparral, grasslands, seeps, and springs. All of these habitat types except the seeps and springs are contiguous with wildlife corridors within the regional park and in open space beyond the park. Absent acquisition of the property by the District, the owners are expected to market for residential development. The landowners are already building on a parcel that they are retaining.
- *Provide the opportunity for a trail linkage between the northwestern quadrant of the regional park and a proposed staging area:* Currently, the only developed road access to the regional park is at the southeastern edge. Obstacles posed by private property, steep terrain, and a scarcity of public roads constrain the development of staging areas for other parts of the park. The addition of the Vinson property to the park would provide a key

link for a trail connection from a proposed staging area on Dublin Canyon Road near Interstate 580 to the northern end of the park.

- *Complete the protection of the Hedd Creek watershed:* Hedd Creek is a tributary to one of the lengthy undeveloped creeks in the park, Devaney Creek. Much of the watershed of Hedd Creek has already been acquired by the District. The proposed Vinson acquisition will protect the rest of the Hedd Creek watershed.
- *Provide a future link to the Calaveras Ridge Trail:* The Calaveras Ridge Trail is a regional trail proposed to extend from Sunol in the south to Las Trampas in the north. Portions of it have been opened, but gaps exist where the alignment would cross private property. Acquisition of the Vinson property would enable filling one of the trail gaps.

The District has requested Conservancy funding to enable it to acquire a 106-acre portion of the 240-acre Vinson Property. The rest of the funds have been committed and the District has entered into a purchase and sale agreement with the landowner. With Conservancy funds in hand, the acquisition could close at the beginning of December 2005.

The District, established in 1934, owns and manages 65 parks and more than 95,250 acres of land in Alameda and Contra Costa Counties for public recreational enjoyment and the preservation of open space, wildlife habitat, and viewsheds. As part of its mission, the District balances environmental concerns with public access, and maintains and restores parklands so that they retain their important scenic, natural and cultural values.

Site Description: The 106-acre Vinson property is located in rolling hills adjacent to the northern end of Pleasanton Ridge Regional Park in unincorporated Alameda County, just west of the City of Pleasanton (Exhibit 1). Three parcels make up the property (Exhibit 2). The land has been used for grazing livestock, but much of the native vegetation is in place.

The gently to steeply sloping terrain supports rich riparian habitat, oak/bay woodlands, chaparral, grasslands, springs, and seeps. The first three of these habitat types are shown in the photographs in Exhibit 3. The wooded hillsides and densely shaded canyons contain a mix of coast live oak, California bay laurel, buckeye, black oak and sycamore. The understory consists of woody and herbaceous plants including coffeeberry, sticky monkey flower, poison oak, and at least two types of ferns. The high rolling grasslands are covered with introduced annual grasses; however, there is also an abundance of native California bunchgrass. These types of habitats may support species of special concern such as the California red-legged frog, California tiger salamander, and Alameda whipsnake. Other animal species likely to be supported by the property's rich habitat include mountain lion, bobcat, deer, fox, golden eagle, prairie falcon, and other raptors.

The riparian corridor system along Hedd Creek supports wildlife movement north from Devaney Canyon and provides a linkage to surrounding open space and pastureland, increasing potential range for mobile species. Such wildlife corridors maintain diversity and prevent inbreeding, increase population size and reduce probability of extinction, increase foraging area, and allow escape or refuge from predators, fire, and other disturbances. Besides bridging habitat laterally,

riparian areas connect vertically, creating roosting and nesting habitat and providing safe passage and cover.

Project History: The District had been trying to obtain the Vinson property since at least 1989, when the District board of directors authorized staff to negotiate with the landowners for acquisition of their property. The District approached Conservancy staff regarding a funding contribution in early 2005, when it had become apparent that negotiations with the property owners and the availability of a portion of the acquisition funding from elsewhere would put the Vinson property within reach. The original request from the District was for \$200,000 for the acquisition. When one of the other anticipated sources of matching funds declined to participate, District staff increased its request for Conservancy funds to \$400,000.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$400,000
Alameda County	450,000
East Bay Regional Park District	<u>100,000</u>
Total Project Cost	\$950,000

The purchase price of the Vinson property is \$848,000, which is fair market value as determined in an approved appraisal. Transaction costs, including closing costs and staff time are estimated at \$102,000, bringing the total estimated project cost to \$950,000. The proposed Conservancy funding will be used towards the purchase price.

The anticipated source of Conservancy funds is the Conservancy’s FY 03/04 appropriation from the California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks and Coastal Protection Act of 2002 (Proposition 40) to the San Francisco Bay Conservancy Program. This proposed authorization is consistent with the funding source because this project would result in the acquisition and protection of land and water resources.

The balance of \$500,000 needed for the purchase and associated costs has been committed by Alameda County (Altamont Landfill Open Space Fund) and the District(1988 Measure AA Bond Fund).

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

This project is undertaken pursuant to Chapter 4.5 of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Public Resources Code Sections 31160-31164, to address resource goals in the San Francisco Bay Area. Under Section 31162(a), the Conservancy may award grants that will “improve public access to and around the bay, coast, ridgetops, and urban open spaces...through completion...of regional bay, coast, and ridge trail systems...” The proposed addition of the Vinson property to Pleasanton Ridge Regional Park will provide a link needed for public access into the northern end of the park and will also provide one of the links needed to complete the Calaveras Ridge Trail, proposed by the District to extend from Sunol to Las Trampas.

Under Section 31162(b), the Conservancy may act to “protect, restore, and enhance natural habitats and connecting corridors, watersheds, scenic areas and other open-space resources of regional importance.” Acquisition of the Vinson property will prevent development of another residential unit and bring its natural resources under the stewardship of the District. The natural resources on the property include riparian wetlands and creeks, oak/bay woodlands, mixed chaparral, grasslands, seeps, and springs, and comprise wildlife corridors and the last piece of the Hedd Creek watershed to be protected by public acquisition.

The proposed project also satisfies each of the five criteria for determining project priority under Section 31163(c) in the following respects: (1) the acquisition is consistent with the District’s 1997 Master Plan and the open space elements of the Alameda County General Plan; (2) it will serve a regional constituency as part of the District’s park system, which attracts visitors from the entire East Bay region; (3) the District and the seller are ready to complete the transaction as soon as the Conservancy authorizes funding; (4) not purchasing this property would likely result in development of another ranchette on the property and the loss of a significant conservation and public recreational opportunity; and (5) the proposal includes matching funds from other sources as described under the “Project Financing” section above.

Furthermore, under Section 31162(d), the Conservancy may “promote, assist, and enhance projects that provide open space and natural areas that are accessible to urban populations for recreational and educational purposes.” This project will provide a link needed for public access to the northern end of the Pleasanton Ridge Regional Park. The northern staging area would be on or near Dublin Canyon Road, just off I-580 near Pleasanton.

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

Consistent with **Goal 10, Objective A**, the proposed project will result in the acquisition of 106 acres of uplands that serve as connecting corridors and are in the watershed of Hedd Creek in Alameda County.

Consistent with **Goal 11, Objective A**, the proposed project will increase the amount of land within the Pleasanton Ridge Regional Park that is accessible to the public for recreational purposes.

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 is supported by State Senator Liz Figueroa, Assemblymember Alberto Torrico, the Alameda County Community Development Agency, and citizens’ groups such as the East Bay Area Trails Council and the Mt. Diablo Audubon Society. Letters of support are attached as Exhibit 4.
4. **Location:** The Vinson property is located wholly in Alameda County and, thus, is within the jurisdiction of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program. This acquisition is contiguous with the Pleasanton Ridge Regional Park and would provide additional protection of natural resources and public access to the park
5. **Need:** The District reports that it has expended all of the 1988 Measure AA funds allocated to the Pleasanton Ridge Regional Park. It has used interest accrued from Measure AA funds to pay for staff and incidental costs associated with the acquisition and has obtained a commitment of \$450,000 from Alameda County. (See details in “Project Financing” section.) However, the District needs Conservancy funds to make up the acquisition funding shortfall.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** This acquisition will result in expansion of the Pleasanton Ridge Regional Park. It will also provide a link needed to create convenient public access to the northern end of the park from I-580.

Additional Criteria

7. **Urgency:** The District reports that, absent its acquisition, the sellers would market the 106 acres for development in accordance with the Alameda County General Plan.
8. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
12. **Readiness:** The District has all of the project elements in place to enable closing escrow on December 1, 2005, in accordance with the terms of the purchase and sale agreement.
13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See the “Consistency with Conservancy’s Strategic Plan Goal(s) and Objective(s)” section above.
15. **Cooperation:** Local, regional, and state agencies are cooperating to fund this project. The landowners have also agreed to grant emergency vehicle and public recreational access across a parcel that they will retain, as well as to share maintenance responsibilities for portions of the access easements.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

As a transfer of ownership of interest in land to preserve open space and habitat, including acquisition for the preservation and restoration of natural conditions, the proposed project is categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) under 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15325. The project is also exempt under Section 15313, which provides a categorical exemption for the acquisition of lands for fish and wildlife conservation, including preservation for public access, where the purpose of the acquisition is to preserve the land in its natural condition. Upon approval, staff will file a Notice of Exemption for this project.