

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
October 27, 2005

CHULA VISTA NATURE CENTER: GREEN SEA TURTLE EXHIBIT

File No. 05-055
Project Manager: Prentiss F. Williams

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse an amount not to exceed \$350,000 to the City of Chula Vista to assist in the construction of a new environmental education exhibit at the Chula Vista Nature Center focused on the endangered green sea turtle (*Chelonia mydas*) which is native to San Diego Bay.

LOCATION: City of Chula Vista bay front, south San Diego Bay, County of San Diego (Exhibit 1).

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Education and Public Access

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: Project Location and Site Map
- Exhibit 2: Photos of green sea turtles
- Exhibit 3: Artist's rendering of green sea turtle exhibit
- Exhibit 4: Photos of Sweetwater Marsh and CVNC
- Exhibit 5: 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 the disbursement of an amount not to exceed three hundred fifty thousand dollars (\$350,000) to the City of Chula Vista to upgrade and expand the environmental education exhibits at the Chula Vista Nature Center, including the installation of a new exhibit that will display and interpret the life cycle of the green sea turtle (*Chelonia mydas*), subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of any Conservancy funds for construction, the City of Chula Vista (the City) shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy:

- a. Evidence that the City has obtained all necessary permits and approvals.
 - b. A final work plan (including the names of any contractors to be used in the completion of the project), and a project schedule and budget.
2. The City shall install and maintain sign(s) on the project site, the design, number and placement of which has been approved by the Executive Officer, acknowledging Conservancy funding participation.”

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 authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapters 3 and 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.
2. The proposed authorization is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
3. The proposed project will serve greater than local needs.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff is requesting the disbursement of \$350,000 to the City of Chula Vista (the City) to install a new live green sea turtle exhibit at the Chula Vista Nature Center (CVNC) that will educate the public about the life cycle of these threatened and endangered creatures, which are native to the coast of southern California and to San Diego Bay (Exhibit 2).

The green sea turtle exhibit will be part of a multi-million dollar renovation of the CVNC which will reconfigure and expand the exhibit area to create the “Discovery Center” as the new centerpiece of the CVNC. The Discovery Center will have as its primary goal to educate the public about core concepts of coastal conservation and environmental stewardship. The new exhibits will all be interactive and encourage hands-on learning experiences for children and adults. The new exhibit area will emphasize local natural history and environmental issues and the exhibits will be grouped into three major habitat areas: bay, marsh and upland.

The sea turtle exhibit will be the signature entrance feature of the Discovery Center. The centerpiece of the exhibit will be a large seawater aquarium containing live green sea turtles and other aquatic plant and animal species native to the shallow waters of San Diego Bay (Exhibit 3). Acrylic view windows will provide visitors with surface and underwater views of the tank. All of the green sea turtles displayed in the aquarium will be animals that have been removed from the wild because of injury and which cannot be rehabilitated sufficiently to allow re-release.

The CVNC was opened in 1987 and is one of only four nature centers in the United States fully accredited by the American Association of Museums. Located in the middle of the Sweetwater Marsh National Wildlife Refuge, the CVNC provides exhibits and programs for the general public as well as for school groups on subjects related to environmental and coastal resources and local natural history.

The CVNC is owned and operated by the City with the oversight of the City Council and a Board of Trustees. The non-profit organization, the Friends of the CVNC, supports the CVNC through its volunteer program, fundraising activities and public outreach. The CVNC also enjoys a collaborative relationship with the United States Fish & Wildlife Service (USFWS), the National Marine Fisheries Service (NMFS), the San Diego Natural History Museum and with the Chula Vista Elementary School District, which provides a full-time science resource teacher to the CVNC during the school year to coordinate the district's field trips to the center.

The Board of Trustees, the CVNC staff and the Friends of the CVNC have been highly effective over the years in operating and expanding the programs and exhibits at the CVNC, including the creation of two major new exhibit areas, "Eagle Mesa" and "the David A. Wergeland Shark & Ray Experience," in 2002. The CVNC is also home to a highly successful captive breeding program for the endangered light-footed clapper rail.

Site Description: The CVNC is located on the Sweetwater Marsh National Wildlife Refuge, on the east side of south San Diego Bay (Exhibit 4). The 316-acre refuge includes salt marsh, uplands and the largest area of emergent wetlands in San Diego Bay. The Refuge protects habitat for more than 215 bird species, including populations of the endangered light-footed clapper rail and Belding's savannah sparrow, and the threatened California least tern. Two federally listed plants are also found within the Refuge: salt marsh bird's beak and Palmer's frankenia. Sweetwater Marsh is the only place in the U.S. where Palmer's frankenia can be found.

The CVNC itself houses an auditorium, classrooms, library, gift shop, bookstore, and administrative offices in addition to the exhibit hall. Outdoor facilities include an observation tower, various wildlife observation decks, a shorebird aviary and salt marsh tidal slough, and the Eagle Mesa and David A. Wergeland Shark & Ray Experience exhibits.

Project History: The Coastal Conservancy has been actively involved in the community effort to develop the CVNC since 1985 when it provided a grant to the City of Chula Vista for preparation of enhancement plans for its bay front. Following the establishment of the Sweetwater Marsh National Wildlife Refuge, the USFWS transferred 3.2 acres of land to the City to enable the development of an interpretive center. The Conservancy subsequently provided grants to the City in 1986 and 1987 for the construction of the building and exhibits and the Chula Vista Nature Center formally opened in July 1987. The Conservancy provided another grant to the CVNC in 1995 to construct the sea water intake system that provides fresh sea water for the all of the center's salt water tanks. The planned renovation will not alter the existing building or the sea water intake.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$ 350,000
Other sources	<u>\$1,931,000</u>
Total Project Cost	\$2,281,000

The anticipated source of Conservancy funds is the fiscal year 2003-2004 appropriation from the Water Security, Clean Drinking Water, Coastal Beach Protection Fund of 2002 (Proposition 50).

Proposition 50 requires that a portion of these funds be used for the development of facilities to promote public access and participation in the conservation of land, water and wildlife. Eligible projects under Proposition 50 include nature centers, like the proposed project, that are in or adjacent to watersheds and wetlands and provide wildlife viewing, outdoor experiences, and conservation education programs (California Water Code Section 79571).

Funding priority is to be given to nature center projects operated by a nonprofit organization that provide educational opportunities to children from urban areas that lack access to such opportunities. Consistent with these requirements, the CVNC provides facilities for research and education focusing on wetland habitat and coastal resource conservation. The center also provides educational programs for K -12 students from throughout the San Diego area including students from inland and/or low-income school districts who otherwise would not have access to coastal natural areas and associated educational programs.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

This proposed project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 9 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation (regarding public access to the coast) and Public Resources Code Section 31119 (regarding K-12th grade education projects).

Section 31119(a)(1), within Chapter 3 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, enables the Conservancy to "undertake educational projects for pupils in kindergarten to grade 12, inclusive, relating to the preservation, protection, enhancement and maintenance of coastal resources," and to "award grants to nonprofit organizations, educational institutions, and public agencies for those purposes." The proposed project will enhance the existing educational exhibits and programs offered at the CVNC, which currently serves over 17,000 K-12th grade students from throughout the region. As described in the Project Summary above, the focus and purpose of the CVNC is to increase the public's understanding of core coastal resource conservation issues.

Chapter 9 (Public Resources Code Sections 31400 – 31409) of the Conservancy's enabling legislation establishes the Conservancy's role in implementing a system of public accessways to and along the State's coastline (Section 31400). Through the proposed authorization, the Conservancy would play a role in providing an important public coastal access opportunity for the general public as well as grade school and high school students.

Consistent with Section 31400, the proposed project would provide funding to the City to enhance a facility that already provides coastal access and nature interpretation to approximately 17,000 school children and 60,000 other visitors annually. The CVNC fully accommodates people with physical disabilities. Development of the expanded interpretive facilities, including the new green sea turtle exhibit, will enhance the quality of public access at Sweetwater Marsh NWR and will increase the public's knowledge of important resource protection needs for the ocean and shore.

Consistent with Section 31400.1, the proposed project would help the City develop, operate and manage the CVNC, a visitor serving facility which meets greater than local needs. As is discussed in the "Project Summary" above, the CVNC serves school children from throughout San Diego County and attracts visitors from throughout the State.

Consistent with Section 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 funds for coastal educational/interpretive centers, the fiscal resources of the grantee, the urgency of the project relative to other eligible projects, and the application of factors prescribed by the Conservancy for the purpose of determining project eligibility and priority (see “Consistency with Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria & Guidelines” discussion below). The proposed authorization would leverage almost \$2,000,000 in matching funds from public and private sources.

Section 31400.3 states that the Conservancy may assist public agencies in developing and implementing a system of public accessways to and along the state's coastline. Consistent with this goal, the CVNC is one of a series of nature centers located in or near the National Wildlife Refuges of San Diego Bay that provide the public with access to these natural areas and educational opportunities.

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

Consistent with **Goal 2 Objective D** of the Conservancy’s Strategic Plan, the proposed project will increase coastal recreational opportunities for residents and visitors by enhancing the CVNC, a regional environmental education center.

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:** There is widespread public support for the CVNC from the local community as well as from throughout the region. The current fundraising campaign for the creation of the Discovery Center has raised more that \$500,000 from private individuals and foundations. In addition to financial support, the CVNC benefits from an active and large force of volunteers, coordinated through CVNC staff and the Friends of CVNC, who contribute 15,000 to 20,000 hours of labor to the center each year. The proposed Conservancy grant for the development of the green sea turtle exhibit has been specifically endorsed by State Senator Denise Ducheny, Assemblyman Juan Vargas, the Friends of the Chula Vista Nature Center, the San Diego Audubon Society, the San Diego Natural History Museum, Southwestern College, Friends of the San Diego Wildlife Refuges, Chula Vista Elementary School District, San Elijo Lagoon Conservancy, County of San Diego,

Wildcoast, National School District, Sweetwater Union High School District. Letters received in support of project are attached as Exhibit 5.

4. **Location:** The proposed project would be located within the coastal zone of San Diego County.
5. **Need:** The City of Chula Vista has already raised \$1,921,600 towards the \$2,281,000 needed for the development of the new Discovery Center. Funding from the Conservancy will all but close the remaining funding gap and allow the CVNC to proceed with the construction in November, 2005.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** As discussed in the “Project Financing” and “Consistency With Conservancy's Enabling Legislation” sections above, the CVNC provides environmental educational programs for school children from throughout San Diego County. The CVNC also attracts the general public as well, with more than 60,000 non-school visitors coming to the center each year from throughout California. With the completion of the new Discovery Center, the number of visitors is expected to increase.

Additional Criteria

9. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
12. **Readiness:** The grantee has finalized plans, obtained all necessary permits, and raised most of the funds necessary for the project. As soon as all of the needed funding is in place, the City will be able to authorize construction of the life support system infrastructure and the fabrication of the exhibits in Seattle, Washington. The completed exhibits will then be shipped to the center and assembled and installed on site. Assuming that construction and fabrication can begin in November, 2005, installation of the exhibits could take place as early as January 2006, with project completion expected in February, 2006.
13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See “Project History” above.
15. **Cooperation:** As discussed under “Support from the Public” in the “Required Criteria” above, fundraising for the proposed project has involved the participation of dozens of individuals and organizations. In addition to financial contributions, the CVNC also collaborates with a number of other organizations to develop and run its educational programs and exhibits, including the US Fish and Wildlife Service, the Chula Vista Elementary School District, the National Marine Fisheries Service, the San Diego Natural History Museum and the California Department of Parks and Recreation.

Consistency with Conservancy Access Standards

The proposed renovation of the exhibits at the CVNC would be consistent with the Conservancy's “Standards and Recommendations for Accessway Location and Development.” In particular, the new facilities will be accessible to persons with disabilities (Standard 13) and will be reconstructed entirely on the existing building footprint so as to minimize any impact on coastal resources or landforms (Standard 1).

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The Chula Vista Nature Center and its interpretive facilities is provided for in the City's Bayfront Specific Plan (Chula Vista Local Coastal Program-Phase III) Section 19.84.10. and Section 19.84.11.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The proposed project would be categorically exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) because it would involve the replacement or reconstruction of existing structures and facilities where the new structures will be located on the same site as the structure to be replaced and will have substantially the same purpose and capacity as the structure to be replaced (14 California Code of Regulations Section 15302). Upon approval, staff will file a Notice of Exemption.