

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

April 27, 2006

SANTA MONICA PIER AQUARIUM

File No. 06-034

Project Manager: David Hayes

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse an amount not to exceed \$650,000 to Heal the Bay to upgrade and expand the environmental education exhibits and to analyze possible future expansion of the Santa Monica Pier Aquarium, Santa Monica Bay, Los Angeles County.

LOCATION: City of Santa Monica, Santa Monica Pier, Santa Monica Bay, County of Los Angeles (Exhibit 1).

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Education and Public Access

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Project Location

Exhibit 2: Aquarium and Activities Photos

Exhibit 3: Letters of Support

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31119 and 31400 *et seq.* of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed six hundred fifty thousand dollars (\$650,000) to Heal the Bay to upgrade and expand the environmental education exhibits and to analyze possible future expansion of the Santa Monica Pier Aquarium, subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of any Conservancy funds for construction, Heal the Bay shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy:
 - a. Evidence that Heal the Bay 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. Heal the Bay 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; and
4. Heal the Bay 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:

Staff requests the disbursement of \$650,000 to Heal the Bay to remodel and expand environmental education exhibits at the Santa Monica Pier Aquarium, focused on the habitats and species of Santa Monica Bay. Additionally the funds will be used for a feasibility analysis for possible future expansion of the aquarium.

One unique aspect of the Pier Aquarium is that all of the species on exhibit are found in and adjacent to Santa Monica Bay and nearly all of the plants and animals were collected by hand nearby.

The Pier Aquarium exhibits will have as their primary goal educating the public about core concepts of coastal conservation, watershed protection 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, the Santa Monica Bay watershed, and Bay and Ocean marine environmental issues.

The Santa Monica Pier Aquarium was opened in 1996 as the UCLA Ocean Discovery Center. In 2003, Heal the Bay took over the operation of the Pier Aquarium from UCLA. Located at the entrance to the Santa Monica Pier, underneath the pier deck, the small aquarium attracted more than 13,000 K-12 students and over 50,000 additional public visitors in 2005 (Exhibit 2).

Most of the students that visit the Pier Aquarium are K-5 students where they come to learn about coastal biological resources, marine conservation, and environmental stewardship. In 2005, the students came from 165 schools representing 24 school districts. Fifty percent of the students come from lower income Title 1 schools. All curricula used at the aquarium are aligned with appropriate educational standards and there are more than half a dozen different curricula choices for classes to choose from. In addition, the pier is home to one of the southern California

Ocean Observing Stations, so the public has access to real time information from an ocean observing system at the end of the pier.

Other features of the aquarium are invertebrate touch tanks, the pier tank, rocky subtidal habitat tanks, sandy bottom habitat tank, video and lecture room, a state of the art teaching laboratory with microscopes hooked up to video monitors, our micro-biologist program targeting 3-4 year olds, our extensive volunteer docent training program (over 150 active volunteers), and extensive participation in educational programs by local summer camps and Boys and Girls Clubs.

The proposed project can be divided into three major tasks: 1) provide new exhibits at the aquarium; 2) enhance existing aquarium infrastructure; and 3) complete a feasibility study on possible aquarium expansion opportunities. The project would be developed cooperatively with experts in the aquarium exhibit field, Heal the Bay and the Coastal Conservancy. One exhibit that is especially appealing is to convert an educational wall in the classroom to an watershed exhibit with freshwater and estuarine organisms from throughout local watersheds. Additional exhibits will be developed and constructed including an effort to use an exhibit on top of the pier to attract visitors below.

Another essential infrastructure need is to provide independent life support systems for the exhibits. Currently all exhibits are linked together through the life support system, thereby making organisms more susceptible to illnesses and exhibits more susceptible to water quality problems. Funds to upgrade an aquarium infrastructure that is over ten years old are critical.

Finally, funds from the Coastal Conservancy will be used to develop a final feasibility study with two objectives. The first is to develop an implementation plan for optimizing the existing aquarium footprint. This plan would serve as the implementation plan for aquarium improvements and new exhibits. The second is to develop a feasibility study for aquarium expansion that may occur within the next 5 to 10 years. As one of the parameters of the feasibility study, all of the proposed aquarium improvements in the initial plan would be maintained in the expansion plan to ensure that the Coastal Conservancy investment has a long lifespan.

Site Description: The Santa Monica Pier Aquarium is located on the Santa Monica Pier (Exhibit 2). The Santa Monica Pier Aquarium itself houses a classroom, life support systems, laboratory, touch tanks, children's library, and administrative offices in addition to the exhibit hall. The planned renovation will not alter the existing pier aquarium configuration or footprint or significantly alter the exterior of the aquarium building. The Santa Monica Pier is located on the beach at the foot of Colorado Avenue. It is one of the only remaining southern California recreational pier that provides primarily low-cost public recreational opportunities. Owned and operated by the City, the pier is heavily used, drawing approximately three million visitors each year.

Project History: The Coastal Conservancy has been actively involved in the community effort to develop the Pier Aquarium, providing Prop 12 grant funds to Heal the Bay in 2003 for aquarium curriculum materials and as bridge funding to ensure that the aquarium would remain open as a community resource after UCLA gave the facility to Heal the Bay. In addition, the Coastal Conservancy assisted the city in the 1980's in organizing a series of public workshops to

develop a pier restoration program and in developing the Carousel Park improvements at the foot of the pier, completed in 1986.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$650,000
City of Santa Monica	\$100,000
Heal the Bay (in-kind)	<u>\$50,000</u>
Total Project Cost	\$800,000

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 Santa Monica Pier Aquarium 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 greater Los Angeles 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 Pier Aquarium, which currently serves over 13,000 K-12th grade students annually from throughout the region. As described in the Project Summary above, the focus and purpose of the Pier Aquarium 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 Heal the Bay to enhance a facility that already provides coastal access and nature interpretation to approximately 13,000 school children and another 50,000 visitors annually. The Pier Aquarium fully accommodates people with physical disabilities. Development of the expanded interpretive facilities, will enhance the quality of public access at the Santa Monica Pier 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 Heal the Bay develop, operate and manage the Pier Aquarium, a visitor serving facility which meets greater than local needs. As is discussed in the "Project Summary" above, the Pier Aquarium serves school children from throughout Los Angeles 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 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 Pier Aquarium is located along Santa Monica Bay providing the public with access to this 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 Pier Aquarium, 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 Pier Aquarium from the local community as well as from throughout the region. In addition to financial support, the Pier Aquarium benefits from an active and large force of volunteers, coordinated through staff, who contributed 8,165 hours of labor to the center in 2005. Letters received in support of project are attached as Exhibit 5.
4. **Location:** The proposed project would be located along Santa Monica Bay, at the Santa Monica Pier within the coastal zone of Los Angeles County.
5. **Need:** Heal the Bay has received a commitment by the City of Santa Monica to provide up to \$100,000 towards the money needed for pier repairs to support upgrading of the aquarium. Funding from the Conservancy will provide essential project funding.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** As discussed in the “Project Financing” and “Consistency With Conservancy's Enabling Legislation” sections above, the Pier Aquarium provides environmental educational programs for school children from throughout Los Angeles County. The Pier Aquarium also attracts the general public as well, with more than 50,000 non-school visitors coming to the aquarium each year from throughout California.

Additional Criteria

9. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
12. **Readiness:** The grantee is currently developing final plans, has obtained permission from the city and is actively raising public and private necessary for the project.
13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See “Project History” above.

Consistency with Conservancy Access Standards

The proposed renovation of the exhibits at the Pier Aquarium 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:

Restoration of the Santa Monica Pier, and the Pier Aquarium and its interpretive facilities, is provided for in the City's Pier Development Guidelines, which are consistent with the City's Local Coastal Program. The access policies within the LCP require that “The Santa Monica Pier shall be maintained as a recreational resource including amusements, public areas for low-cost recreational uses, fishing and strolling, visitor-serving development, and public parking.” In addition, “New development on the Pier will be designed to retain and enhance the character of the existing Pier and to include improvement in public uses concurrent with any development intended for lease to private operators. The Pier will remain a concentration of visitor oriented public and private uses, dominated by public open space.”

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). The feasibility study is exempt as a planning study under 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15626. Upon approval, staff will file a Notice of Exemption.