

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

October 5, 2006

**HUMBOLDT BAY WATER TRAILS IMPLEMENTATION PROGRAM –
DESIGN AND ENGINEERING**

File No. 06-073

Project Manager: Moira McEnespy

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$100,000 to the Redwood Community Action Agency to complete the design and engineering phase of the Humboldt Bay Water Trails Implementation Program.

LOCATION: Humboldt Bay, Humboldt County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Public Access

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: Project Location Map

Exhibit 2: Conceptual Draft of a Water Trails Site Map

Exhibit 3: 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 disbursement of up to one hundred thousand dollars (\$100,000) to the Redwood Community Action Agency, a nonprofit organization, to complete the design and engineering phase of the Humboldt Bay Water Trails Implementation Program. Prior to disbursement of any funds, the Executive Officer of the Conservancy shall approve in writing a work plan, budget and schedule, and any contractors to be employed in these tasks.”

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 Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code regarding public access to the coast.

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2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.
 3. The Redwood Community Action Agency 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.”
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PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends that the Conservancy authorize disbursement of up to \$100,000 to the Redwood Community Action Agency (“RCAA”) to complete the design and engineering phase of the Humboldt Bay Water Trails Implementation Program.

“Water trails” are water-based routes for recreational canoeists and kayakers that are anchored by land access (or ‘put-in’ and ‘take-out’) sites. These routes provide educational and scenic experiences and are designed to accommodate boaters of all ages and abilities. With an integrated system of facilities, ‘trail’ guides and access site informational signage, good water trail programs encourage minimum-impact use and emphasize stewardship of the aquatic ecosystems, historical features and cultural sites. Humboldt Bay presents many opportunities for paddle boaters, including views of wildlife, scenic vistas, observation of maritime activity, exercise, an alternate way to travel to waterfront destinations, and accessible, yet “wild” experiences. However, currently many challenges face the uninformed boater, such as limited public access facilities, rapidly-changing water levels, bay currents and wind, extensive mudflats, sensitive resources and other competing uses.

Though potential paddling opportunities abound, safe, user-friendly access to the bay for paddlers is limited. Currently, only two locations on Humboldt Bay are designed specifically for canoe and kayak access: the Hookton Slough dock in the south bay and the Adorni dock on the Eureka waterfront, which has only a short-term modification for paddlers. As a result, many paddlers use a number of unofficial access points, which may involve less desirable practices such as trespassing on private land, use of unsafe or inadequate parking, use of unsafe or inadequate boat-launching facilities, and disturbances to sensitive shorelines.

There is also very limited information available (through local paddling clubs) for paddlers about tide-based trip planning, water safety, wildlife viewing protocol, and the natural and human history of the bay – almost none of the existing information is posted at access sites.

Furthermore, much of the bay is very shallow, and becomes exposed mudflats at lower tides. A tidal drop of just an inch or two can strand the unwary boater on mudflats that are too soft to be considered “walkable.” The force of tidal currents and wind can also be significant, even in the upper reaches of the sloughs. It is very important for paddlers to know where channels are located, understand tidal influences, prevailing wind directions and how to avoid potential conflicts with larger vessels.

In addition, the abundance of wildlife creates the potential for harmful disturbance by paddlers if they are not informed about appropriate wildlife viewing behavior. Shorebirds and waterfowl, harbor seals, sea lions, eelgrass habitats and other sensitive species exist in large numbers throughout the bay and are equally subject to disturbance by uninformed paddlers.

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Lastly, Humboldt Bay is a multi-use bay. In addition to paddlers and wildlife, Humboldt Bay is used by recreational power and sail boaters, commercial fishermen and fishing vessels, various government and law enforcement vessels, tour operators, deep-draft commercial ships, waterfowl hunters and mariculture operators. Uninformed paddlers can inadvertently put themselves and others in potentially dangerous situations by being unaware of these other uses and by not using prudent safety precautions.

In the design and engineering phase (Phase I) of the Humboldt Bay Water Trails Implementation Program, RCAA, in collaboration with the Humboldt Bay Harbor, Recreation and Conservation District (Harbor District) and relevant stakeholders, will conduct tasks by Spring 2008 to improve access for and address the needs of small, human-powered boats that can be hand-carried to and from launch sites (primarily canoes and touring kayaks). Specifically, this project will result in engineered designs for ramp and/or dock modifications; plans and specifications for access site improvements (e.g., parking, restrooms, other amenities); designs for informational and interpretive maps, kiosks and signs; an updated *Humboldt Bay Water Trails Map & Guide* (contains access, site amenity, wildlife viewing, safety and physical characteristic information); and identification of necessary permits and potential funding sources for construction. The project will examine the following types of facilities and water access points:

- **Boat Docks.** There are several public boat docks around the bay but only one is designed for paddlers and another is only temporarily modified to accommodate paddlers. Standard boat docks are usually elevated too high from the water surface to facilitate accessible launching of paddleboats.
- **Boat Ramps.** Although boat ramps are designed for and used primarily by trailored motorboats and sailboats, the ramps can provide a convenient hard surface for paddleboat access. Inconveniences can include slippery surfaces and shallow slopes which make it difficult to get in or out of a paddleboat.
- **Improved or Readily-Usable Shoreline.** A number of sites have not been improved for paddleboat access but are physically usable because they have firm substrates, access at all tide levels, and adjacent parking.
- **Unimproved or Poor Condition Shoreline.** Sites with limitations, but still used by paddlers.
- **Wheelchair-Accessible Sites.** ADA-accessible sites need to include adequate parking, restrooms and boat launch facilities that allow disabled boaters to safely and comfortably utilize them.
- **Paddleboat Access Only Sites.** There are a few paddling access sites not accessible by motor vehicles.

The Natural Resources Services Division of RCAA has been actively working in north coast communities since 1982. Among the services RCAA offers are non-motorized transportation, recreation, and public access planning; and development of interpretive and educational signs. The Conservancy has a long history of successful work with RCAA, the most relevant to this project being on the *Humboldt Bay Trails Feasibility Study (December 2001)*, which recommended development of a “Humboldt Bay Water Trail Program” to improve bay access and stewardship, and the Humboldt Bay Interpretive Signing Program. Exhibit 2 contains a

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conceptual water trails map that was developed along with the recommendation in the *Humboldt Bay Trails Feasibility Study*.

Site Description: One of the largest and most pristine bays on the west coast, a significant avian stopover on the Pacific Flyway, the “front yard” of the north coast’s population centers and a desirable resting area for US 101 travelers, Humboldt Bay offers an exceptional paddling experience - for those with information about where and when to go. This unique and scenic bay consists of three parts, namely Arcata Bay in the north, Entrance Bay in the middle and South Bay. Arcata Bay, the largest, is wide and shallow like the South Bay – both areas experience relatively light boat traffic. The central portion of the bay is a narrow, deeper channel – with most of the boating traffic – that connects the northern and southern bays and leads to the mouth of the bay. In addition, Mad River, Freshwater, Elk River and Hookton (Salmon Creek) Sloughs offer some of the best paddling experiences.

Humboldt Bay is a recreational resource used increasingly by both local and visiting recreational boaters. At lower tides, the bay and its sloughs are intimate places of sinuous, narrow channels teeming with wildlife and views of exposed mudflats. At high tides, the bay is an expansive and relatively wild place for its proximity to two of the region’s largest cities. In addition to the natural beauty of the bay, there are also many historical, cultural and biological features to be discovered from the water.

Project History: This project seeks to implement the *Humboldt Bay Trails Feasibility Study (December 2001)*, prepared by RCAA with Conservancy funding, which recommends development of a “Humboldt Bay Water Trail Program” to improve bay access and stewardship. Top priorities included improvements to existing dock and ramp facilities, the addition of informational signage regarding paddling safety and habitat awareness, and improved parking and site enhancements. This project will also expand on work conducted by the Humboldt State University Natural Resources Planning Senior Planning Practicum entitled *Safety-Related Issues Concerning the Development of a Humboldt Bay Water Trails Program*, which recommended approaches for providing paddling information regarding weather and natural hazards, tides, harbor entrance and bay species disturbance.

In addition, the proposed project is consistent with the *Humboldt Bay Management Plan (Draft March 2005, final version pending; Humboldt Bay Harbor, Recreation and Conservation District, prepared with Coastal Conservancy funding)*, which is to “be read and implemented in terms of its consistency with the requirements of the Coastal Act,” upon which the County’s certified Local Coastal Program is based. Specifically, the proposed project is consistent with Policy RFA-3, which supports provision of improved water-oriented recreation facilities, Policy RFA-9, which supports clear signage for all public recreation and access projects, and Policy RSA-1, which supports provision and improvement of boat launch sites throughout the Bay, including facilities for water-oriented recreational craft such as kayaks and canoes.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$100,000
Humboldt Bay Harbor, Recreation and Conservation District	
-cash	4,750
-in-kind	13,800
Total Project Cost	\$118,550

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The proposed source of Conservancy funds for this authorization is a 2004 appropriation to the Conservancy from Proposition 40, “The California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks and Coastal Protection Act of 2002.” These funds are allocated to the Conservancy for development, restoration and protection of land and water resources in accordance with the Conservancy’s enabling legislation (Division 21 of the Public Resources Code).

The proposed project will help develop land and water resources (namely design and engineer a water trails program) and is consistent with the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, as discussed in the “Consistency with Conservancy’s enabling legislation” section of this report, below. The proposed authorization is thus consistent with Proposition 40.

Matching funds and in-kind services provided by the Humboldt Bay Harbor, Recreation and Conservation District will go largely toward refining site priorities developed during the *Humboldt Bay Trails Feasibility Study*, obtaining permits, and identifying construction funds.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project is undertaken pursuant to Sections 31400 *et seq.* (Chapter 9) of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, pertaining to public access to and along the coast.

Consistent with Section 31400, the proposed project will enable the Conservancy to have a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the state’s coastline, specifically by participating in design and engineering of access to water trails within and around Humboldt Bay.

Under Public Resources Code Sections 31400.1 and 31400.2, the Conservancy may provide up to the total cost of the initial development of public accessways by any public agency or nonprofit organization, if the accessways will serve more than local public needs. In the proposed project, the Conservancy will aid a public agency (the Harbor District) and a nonprofit organization (RCAA) by providing approximately 80% of the cost to design and engineer water trails and access sites in and around Humboldt Bay, a resource of regional, state and even international importance.

Under Public Resources Code Section 31400.3, the Conservancy may assist public agencies and nonprofit organizations in establishing a system of public accessways. In the proposed project, the Conservancy will aid a public agency (the Harbor District) and a nonprofit organization (RCAA) in design and engineering of water trails and access sites in and around Humboldt Bay.

Consistent with Public Resources Code Section 31408(a), the proposed project entails the Conservancy coordinating development of water trails and access sites in and around Humboldt Bay. Consistent with the definition of the California Coastal Trail, these water trails will support a continuous public right-of-way along the California coastline, and will foster appreciation and stewardship of the scenic and natural resources of the coast through a mode of nonmotorized transportation.

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

Consistent with **Goal 2 Objective B**, the proposed project will help open areas that are currently inaccessible to public use, namely portions of Humboldt Bay that are largely inaccessible due to limited points of entry for paddle boats and lack of information on how and where to access the

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bay. Further consistent with this goal and objective, the proposed project will work with all interested stakeholders to prevent impacts to sensitive areas.

Consistent with **Goal 2 Objective D Strategy 1b**, the proposed project will help to protect existing investments in infrastructure and land by redesigning facilities, namely ramp and dock facilities, such that they will help to increase coastal recreational opportunities for residents and visitors.

**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 proposed project has the support of the public. Please see letters of support in Exhibit 3.
4. **Location:** The proposed project would be located entirely within the coastal zone of County of Humboldt.
5. **Need:** Although the proposed project has in-kind support from the Harbor District and the strong commitment of RCAA, it is difficult to find funding absent the Conservancy to conduct the design and engineering work that constitutes this phase of the Humboldt Bay Water Trails Implementation Program.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** Humboldt Bay is one of the largest and most pristine bays on the west coast, a significant avian stopover on the Pacific Flyway, the "front yard" of the north coast's population centers and a desirable resting area for US 101 travelers. Humboldt Bay is a recreational destination for many visitors from within the State and the nation, particularly given its proximity to several State and National parks and recreation areas (*e.g.*, Humboldt Redwoods State Park, Redwood National Park). Humboldt Bay also serves the student population drawn to Humboldt State University. The proposed project thus has regional, state, and national interest.

Additional Criteria

8. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The proposed project addresses a goal, objective and action of the Ocean Protection Council's Strategic Plan (adopted June 8, 2006): Goal E (Ocean and Coastal Ecosystems: Significantly increase healthy ocean and coastal wildlife populations and communities in California) Objective 5 (Encourage sustainable economic activity) Action 5e (Investigate options for water trails in coastal locations other than San Francisco Bay).
13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See "Project History" section, above.

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15. Cooperation: The Grantee, RCAA, will develop the “Humboldt Bay Water Trails Implementation Program” in collaboration with the Harbor District and many other agencies and organizations such as the Cities of Eureka and Arcata, the County of Humboldt, the U.S. Fish & Wildlife Service, Explore North Coast paddling club, and others.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The proposed project is consistent with the intent of Section 3.50, “Access,” of the *Humboldt County General Plan, Volume II, Humboldt Bay Area Plan of the Humboldt County Local Coastal Program* (“LCP,” certified October 14, 1982) in that it seeks to provide for “recreational opportunities around the Bay area that add to the local economy, and enhance the quality of life for local residents.”

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The proposed project is statutorily and categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to (1) 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15262 in that it involves only feasibility or planning studies for possible future actions which the Conservancy has not approved, adopted or funded; and (2) 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15306 in that it involves basic data collection, research, and resource evaluation activities which will not result in any disturbance to an environmental resource, and which will be undertaken as part of a study leading to an action which the Conservancy has not yet approved, adopted, or funded. Staff will file a “Notice of Exemption” upon approval of the project.