

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

October 5, 2006

**VENICE CANALS BEACH ACCESS PROJECT**

File No. 06-077

Project Manager: Kara Kemmler

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$100,000 to the Venice Canals Foundation to construct a public beach accessway from the Venice Canals to Venice Beach.

**LOCATION:** Two city-owned unimproved properties in the community of Venice, City of Los Angeles, Los Angeles County (Exhibit 1): one located between 2420 and 2500 Pacific Avenue; and an adjacent unimproved public right-of-way located between 2420 and 2500-2502 Strongs Drive (see Exhibit 2).

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Public Access

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**EXHIBITS**

Exhibit 1: Regional Map

Exhibit 2: Conceptual Site Plan

Exhibit 3: Letters of Support

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**RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:**

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

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed one hundred thousand dollars (\$100,000) to the Venice Canals Foundation (VCF) to construct a public beach accessway from the Venice Canals to Venice Beach in Los Angeles County, subject to the condition that prior to disbursement of Conservancy funds for the project, the grantee shall:

1. Submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy:
  - a. A work program, including final design plans and specifications, schedule, and budget for construction.
  - b. The names and qualifications of any contractors to be employed in carrying out the work.
  - c. Evidence that that all necessary permits and approvals have been obtained.

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- d. A signing plan for the project acknowledging Conservancy funding; and
2. Enter into an agreement pursuant to Public Resources Code Section 31116(c) with the Conservancy and the City of Los Angeles to protect the public interest in all improvements or developments constructed under this grant and assure public access.”

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 set forth in Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (§31400 *et seq.*) 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 project will serve access needs beyond those of the local community.”

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**PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff is recommending that the Conservancy provide a grant of up to \$100,000 to the Venice Canals Foundation (VCF) to construct a public beach accessway from the Venice Canals to Venice Beach in Los Angeles County. As shown in Exhibit 2, the project will occur on two adjacent vacant lots located between the Grand Canal and Venice Beach (northern extent of Dockweiler State Beach).

The empty lots are currently used by area residents and visitors to walk from the beach to the historic Venice Canals. However, it is an unsightly and unsafe accessway; pedestrians have to avoid rusty fencing, holes in the ground, trash and debris. The project consists of various improvements to create a safe and scenic recreational resource for residents and visitors to the area. The proposed project will involve removal of the existing hazards, trash and debris. Invasive plants will also be removed and replaced with drought tolerant, regionally appropriate plants. An accessway will be constructed of a permeable, even surface for pedestrian travel. In addition, ramped curbs will be installed to facilitate access for those with limited physical abilities. Other improvements include amenities, such as signage, trash receptacles and fencing. The proposed Conservancy grant will fund the public access components of the project.

The project also includes a stormwater management component which will improve water quality and solve a persistent flooding issue. This portion of the project is being funded by a City of Los Angeles through a Proposition “O” grant (\$70,000). The design includes swales to control stormwater onsite and allow for infiltration of runoff that currently flows directly into the canals and out to the ocean.

The Venice Canals Foundation was formed by local residents that supported improvements to this accessway. The VCF is a nonprofit 501c3 organization. The project plans have been developed and will be implemented and maintained through a partnership between the VCF and

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the City of Los Angeles. The City owns the proposed accessway and is very supportive of this project as demonstrated by the matching funds provided by the City.

**Site Description:** The project area is composed of two vacant, unimproved, city-owned properties in the community of Venice: a vacant lot between Pacific Avenue and Strongs Drive; and an easement between Strongs Drive and Grand Canal. The two adjacent lots would join 25<sup>th</sup> Avenue to the west and complete the connection from Venice Beach to the Venice Canals.

Venice is an unusually pedestrian oriented area for Los Angeles. Many of its houses actually have their principal entries from pedestrian only streets with automobile access restricted to alleys in the rear. However, like much of Los Angeles, Venice is also well-known for traffic congestion. The proposed project would further promote non-vehicular, pedestrian access to and within the community. Venice and Venice Beach are two of the most popular tourist attractions in California. Hundreds of visitors stroll the Venice Boardwalk along the shoreline and travel south to experience the historic Venice Canals everyday. In addition, the area serves as a venue for large scale public events such as the annual Venice Garden Tour, which draws in people from all over Los Angeles County.

**Project History:** Venice is a beach community with a unique character and history. Given the pedestrian oriented nature of the community with a focus on the historic and scenic qualities of the canals and the lively, eclectic atmosphere at the beach, safe and scenic pedestrian friendly areas serve to enhance the visitor’s experience. Concerned local residents who wanted to convert the vacant lots into a safe and scenic accessway for the public initiated the proposed project. A small community group presented the proposed project to Conservancy staff in Fall 2004. Over the last two years, those local residents worked with City Council members, agencies, organizations and community members to bring the project to fruition. Part of that effort was the formation of the non-profit organization, the Venice Canals Foundation. Since 2004, the VCF and the City have worked together to develop conceptual plans and obtain permits from local and state agencies.

**PROJECT FINANCING:**

Coastal Conservancy	\$ 100,000
City of Los Angeles Watershed Protection Division Measure “O”	\$ 70,000
City of Los Angeles Dept. of Public Works Neighborhood Beautification Grant	<u>\$ 10,000</u>

**Total Project Cost** **\$ 180,000**

Staff expects to use funds appropriated to the Conservancy from the “California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks and Coastal Protection Fund” (Proposition 40). This funding source may be used for rehabilitation, restoration, protection, and development of land and water resources in accordance with the provisions of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code. As discussed below, the project is consistent with Chapter 9 of Division 21. Proposition 40 also requires the Conservancy to give priority to grant

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projects with matching funds. As indicated, the City of Los Angeles will contribute \$80,000 to the proposed project.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:**

Public Resources Code Section 31400 directs the Conservancy to have a principal role in the implementation of public accessways to and along the state's coastline. To this end, §31400.3 authorizes the Conservancy to "provide such assistance as is required to aid public agencies and nonprofit organizations in establishing a system of public coastal accessways, and related functions necessary to meet the objectives of this division." Funding this coastal access project is consistent with these provisions as well as with §31400.1, which authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to a public agency for purposes of developing lands suitable for public accessways to and along the coast, when the subject accessways serve greater than local needs. The project would serve the recreational needs of visitors from all parts of the county and state.

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 projects, the fiscal resources of the grantee, and the application of factors prescribed by the Conservancy for the purpose of determining project eligibility and priority.

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

The proposed project is consistent with **Goal 2, Objective B**, which encourages improvement of inaccessible areas for public benefit while being sensitive to the needs of nearby landowners and people with limiting physical conditions. The project proposes to construct improvements on two unimproved publicly owned lots currently not in a condition safe for public access. The project was initiated and designed by nearby residents in a manner sensitive to the needs of people with physical limitations and considerate of the natural environment. A ramped curb at the coastal terminus of the accessway has been built into the project design to facilitate access for people with limited mobility. In addition, the project's planting palette will be reviewed by an appropriate resource agency (or agencies) to ensure compatibility with the surrounding environment.

Further, the proposed project is consistent with **Goal 2, Objective D** as it increases coastal recreational opportunities and corrects existing dangerous conditions, such as debris, rusty fences and uneven ground, by removing debris and invasive plants, installing a permeable path and erosion control measures, providing public amenities such as trash receptacles, and installing signage guiding visitors to the coast and waterfront.

**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:

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### **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:** VCF has worked over the past two years with various residents, organizations, and agencies to gain momentum for the project. The project enjoys support from Congresswoman Jane Harmon, City of Los Angeles Councilman Bill Rosendahl, Friends of Venice Library and the Venice Canals Association. See Exhibit 3 for project support letters.
4. **Location:** The proposed project is located within the coastal zone of the scenic and historic beach community of Venice, in the City of Los Angeles, Los Angeles County. See the "Site Description" section above.
5. **Need:** VCF has secured almost half of the funding needed for the project, and will also provide irrigation and short-term maintenance of the project once it is completed. Still, a funding gap remains. Conservancy funding is needed to enable implementation of the project.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** In addition to serving the community of Venice, this project would benefit all of Los Angeles County and visitors who come to Venice from all over the state and the country. The world famous Venice Beach and Boardwalk and scenic Venice Canals draw millions of visitors each year. The project will provide a direct connection for pedestrian access between these popular attractions.

### **Additional Criteria**

12. **Readiness:** The proposed project was presented to Conservancy staff in Fall 2004 by a small community group. In order to become eligible to receive grant funds to benefit the project, the project advocates moved to form a nonprofit organization (VCF) to enable the project to move forward. Meanwhile, conceptual plans have been prepared for the project and permits have been obtained from local and state agencies. Since the group has recently established 501(c)3 status as VCF and has secured a significant portion of the project funding, it is ready and eager to commence final design and construction as soon as the Conservancy takes action.
15. **Cooperation:** The project arose out of a cooperative effort among local residents and organizations seeking to transform the frequently used route into a more aesthetically pleasing and safe accessway for locals and visitors. The City of Los Angeles has lent strong support for VCF's efforts to improve the city-owned properties and has assisted in obtaining necessary permits. The City, VCF and other organizations will contribute toward irrigation for new vegetation as well as short and long-term maintenance of the improvements.

### **CONSISTENCY WITH COASTAL ACT POLICIES:**

The project lies in the coastal zone of Venice in the City of Los Angeles, however, the area does not yet have a Coastal Commission certified specific area plan. Therefore, the Coastal Act is the standard of review for permits and plans in this area and the Commission is the decision making

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body. A Coastal Development Permit Waiver for the proposed project was approved by the Coastal Commission on October 13, 2005. The Commission found that the project will enhance public access, recreational opportunities and the scenic nature of the area. The Commission further found that the proposed development will not adversely impact coastal resources, public access, or public recreational opportunities, and is consistent with Chapter 3 policies of the Coastal Act and past Commission actions in the area.

**COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:** The proposed project is categorically exempt from CEQA under 14 Cal. Code of Regs. Section 15304 as it consists of minor alterations in the condition of land, water and vegetation which do not involve the removal of healthy, mature, scenic trees. Conservancy staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon approval of the project.