

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

January 18, 2007

**SALMON CREEK FALLS ENVIRONMENTAL CENTER**

File No. 06-108

Project Manager: Richard Retecki

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$750,000 to the Harmony Union School District (HUSD) for the construction of an environmental education center at Salmon Creek School, Sonoma County.

**LOCATION:** Occidental, Sonoma County

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Environmental Education

---

**EXHIBITS**

Exhibit 1: Project Location

Exhibit 2: Site Plan

Exhibit 3: Environmental Education Center design

Exhibit 4: Letters of Support

---

**RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:**

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following Resolution pursuant to Section 31119 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed seven hundred fifty thousand dollars (\$750,000) to the Harmony Union School District (HUSD) to construct an environmental education center, subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of funds, the grantee shall submit for the review of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy:
  - a. A work program, including a budget and project schedule.
  - b. Final design and construction drawings.
  - c. Documentation that HUSD has obtained all permits and approvals required for the project.
  - d. Any contractor to be retained by HUSD to undertake work on the project.
  - e. A sign plan for the project acknowledging Conservancy funding.

2. HUSD shall provide evidence that all additional funds necessary for the constructions of the environmental education center have been secured."

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 Chapter 3 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.
2. The proposed authorization is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001.”

**PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff is recommending the Conservancy authorize the disbursement of up to \$750,000 to the Harmony Union School District (HUSD) to construct an environmental center to include an environmental learning center, auditorium, cafeteria, habitat gardens, native species plantings, and solar energy panels at its Salmon Creek School.

The Salmon Creek School is located approximately one mile south of Occidental, a vibrant rural community located within the Salmon Creek watershed in southwestern Sonoma County (see Exhibits 1 & 2). The school site totals 67 acres, and is comprised of several natural areas, the school buildings, a soccer field and basketball courts. Salmon Creek traverses the western boundary of the school site.

In October of 2003, the Conservancy authorized grant funding for Phase I of the Salmon Creek Green School project. Activities completed under Phase I included: construction of a creek observation deck that provides safe access for viewing and monitoring Salmon Creek and its fishery resources; construction of a “straw bale” working greenhouse and nursery that provides native plants for Salmon Creek and neighboring watersheds; construction of an outdoor classroom for classes, lectures, and forums; a trail study to assess the feasibility of connecting campus trails to other trail systems leading inland and to the coast; a timber cruise that resulted in a forestry management plan for oak woodlands and redwood forest on the campus’ eastern boundary; enhancement of the onsite wetland and the removal of invasive species; and development of the design, budget, and funding program for the Salmon Creek Falls Environmental Center – the subject of this authorization. The school’s environmental education program was expanded and improved with school district resources to provide focused learning, curriculum development, a “seed” program for teachers, and a monitoring program for Salmon Creek.

The HUSD worked through a Steering Committee and architects to arrive at a design for the Salmon Creek Falls Environmental Center. A final design was approved by the Division of School Architects in July 2006. The proposed environmental education center is a model of sustainable design, and highlights the Salmon Creek School and its diverse ecosystems (see Exhibit 3). The environmental center was designed to meet the rigorous Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) criteria, a program developed in 2000 by the US Green Building Council to promote environmentally friendly construction methods throughout the construction industry. The HUSD has registered the building with the U.S. Green Building Council and is pursuing a LEED™ Gold Certification. The building has been designed to provide

flexibility in uses and create opportunities for local organizations and the public to access the space. There are very few LEED™ buildings in the world that are open to the public. This will be a unique opportunity to experience “green” building practices. Many product manufacturers have been contacted and are willing to donate their materials or labor to this demonstration building.

The proposed environmental center is a 6,150 sq.ft. single-story at grade structure that will utilize passive solar space heating and an under-floor hydronic back-up heating system, photovoltaic electrical generation, rainwater collection and waste recycling. Only non toxic, resource-efficient building materials will be utilized throughout the building. There will be an environmental learning center for students with a library and office space for community use by the public and nonprofit organizations.

The environmental center will not increase the student capacity of the Salmon Creek School other than to serve the already anticipated increases in enrollment at the school, expected to be less than 20 % of the current population. Nonetheless, The HUSD’s project would lead to an increase in the number of pupils studying environmental education on the site from the current 420 permanent students per year to approximately an additional 1,200 - 1,500 visiting students per year. The visiting students utilizing the environmental education program will do use half-day schedules, during after school hours, on weekends, or, during special environmental education programs. Nonprofit organizations and others will use the facility during evening hours or on weekends.

At present, the existing environmental program serves the immediate school population and provides a school garden for plant propagation, a recycling program, worm bins, compost for the school site, an annual harvest celebration, and, a yearly plant sale. There have been numerous requests from other school districts and nonprofit organizations to use the Salmon Creek site and programs for their students or members. The proposed project and facilities would continue to serve the existing K-8 local and county school population, but with the proposed improvements high school students, college students, and nonprofit organizations could utilize the campus and surrounding natural areas.

The Salmon Creek School has an existing environmental education program that is recognized for its excellence. The school’s environmental education program was expanded and improved with school district resources to provide focused learning, curriculum development, a “seed” program for teachers, and a monitoring program for Salmon Creek. The school district has a history of environmental partnerships with educational institutions, public agencies, and nonprofit organizations. The program is in demand by its own school population (which is increasing) and by others in Sonoma County. The school locale offers various environments and habitats that provide exceptional opportunities for environmental education. The Environmental Center will bolster existing environmental education partnerships and make the school attractive to many others seeking a magnet location for environmental education.

**Site Description:** The Salmon Creek School site totals 67 acres. The school buildings and physical education areas are somewhat centrally located within the campus and are surrounded by prominent natural areas. A forest of oak and Redwood dominate the eastern quarter of the campus. The forest contains an existing trail and an abandoned railroad right-of-way that traverses the forest from south to north.

South from the administration building, and totaling approximately 12 acres, is a wetland area. The wetland is a swale that traps runoff down-slope from the forest. It is a lush verdant area that is essentially undisturbed and is off-limits to the school population except for supervised projects. Salmon Creek flows along the western boundary of the site and several segments are in need of riparian corridor restoration. Other segments of the stream are shrouded by a dense canopy of riparian growth. The stream channel has several hydrologic breaks that provide waterfalls but also natural fish ladders for migrating species. One of the waterfall breaks is the site of the observation deck.

As a result of Phase I implementation, the campus now includes the creek observation deck, the outdoor classroom, the nursery and greenhouse, a trail system, and an enhanced wetland.

The Salmon Creek is a naturally diversified and dynamic coastal stream and watershed that flows through three major geologic formations on its way to the Pacific Ocean. The school site is located within quick striking distance of the Sonoma coast, the Estero Americano, and the Russian River, all of which are utilized by the HUSD as outdoor classrooms.

**Project History:** The Salmon Creek Green School project came about as part of the Conservancy’s effort to address the environmental, agricultural, aquatic, and environmental resources within the Salmon Creek watershed. This project is one of five that has been funded and implemented to enhance and restore the watershed and its resources. The Conservancy has funded the Phase I Green School project (described in the “Project Summary” section above), the Salmon Creek Estuary Study, the Salmon Creek Ranch Management Plans, the Coastal Prairie Stewardship Study, and the Grazing Handbook development and publication. The Salmon Creek Falls Environmental Center is a component of the Green School project.

A Phase I scope of work requirement was the design, site location, cost estimate, finance plan, and CEQA evaluation for the Salmon Creek Falls Environmental Center at the Salmon Creek School location. All of the work components of the Phase I grant have been completed and the HUSD is ready to move forward with building construction. The building design and site location have been permitted by the Division of Architects. Cost of construction has been estimated and the School District has been aggressively pursuing construction funds through a private and public finance campaign.

**PROJECT FINANCING:**

|  |           |
|--|-----------|
| Coastal Conservancy                              | \$750,000 |
| Office of Public School Construction             | 812,270   |
| HUSD Restricted Capital Project Funds            | 200,000   |
| Marimar Torres Donation                          | 300,000   |
| Sonoma County Community Foundation – Schulz Fund | 160,000   |
| Autodesk, Inc.                                   | 5,000     |
| Osmosis Spa                                      | 5,000     |

*SALMON CREEK FALLS ENVIRONMENTAL CENTER*

---

|                           |                    |
|---------------------------|--------------------|
| Sebastopol Rotary         | 2,000              |
| Private Contributions     | <u>6,950</u>       |
| <b>Total Project Cost</b> | <b>\$2,241,220</b> |

The cost of the Salmon Creek Falls Environmental Center is estimated between \$1,870,000 and \$2,205,000 by the architects for the Center. The range of the estimate is related to the choice of materials for the building shell, glass walls, flooring, and the base of the living roof. The cost of construction will be directly related to the choice of those materials selected for the Center. Additional fund raising to complete the internal improvements is underway.

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 authorizes the use of funds for 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). The HUSD has received a grant from the State Office of Public School Construction along with numerous other pledges of funds for construction of the Environmental Center.

In November of 2006, the HUSD began a public capital campaign to raise the necessary funds for the internal improvements of the Environmental Center. A 1,000 piece mail-out was sent to perspective donors who were supplied with a "Wish List" of improvements or naming rights, such as the auditorium, to which their contributions may be applied. At this time, two improvements and two naming rights, including the auditorium, have been received. Those four "Wish List" items total \$385,000 towards the completion of the Environmental Center. The Sonoma County Community Foundation, through the Schulz Fund, and the Phelps Winery (a neighbor of the Salmon Creek Middle School) have each pledged yearly contributions for the next three years. Based on the success of the Phase I project, and the current level of funding for Phase II construction, staff believes that all the funds necessary for the completion of the Environmental Center internal improvements will be obtained.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:** The Salmon Creek Green School project is undertaken pursuant to Public Resources Code Section 31119 (a) (1) of Chapter 3 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation. Section 31119(a)(1) 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 may award grants to nonprofit organizations, educational institutions, and public agencies for those purposes. The proposed project will complement the existing environmental education program. This authorization will assist with the construction of an environmental center that will allow for the participation of 1,200 to 1,500 students per year from the urban centers of Sonoma County and the Bay Area. The Salmon Creek Falls Environmental Center will provide an environmental learning center, an auditorium, a cafeteria, habitat gardens, native landscaping, and solar panels.

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

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective D, subsection 1.c.**, the proposed project will expand and improve environmental education programs and support the creation of 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:** The proposed project has a broad level of support from school districts, colleges and universities, public agencies and officials, environmental education programs, nonprofit organizations, and the public in general. Project supporters include: Congresswoman Lynn Woolsey, former State Senator Wes Chesbro, State Senator Patricia Wiggins, the California High Performance Schools Program, the Occidental Arts and Ecology Center, the UC Bodega Marine Lab, Sonoma State University Environmental Education Department, and the UC Extension Program. Letters of Support are included in Exhibit 4.
4. **Location:** The Salmon Creek watershed lies within western Sonoma County, one of the nine Bay Area counties, and is a coastal watershed with valuable and diverse resources and habitat. The Environmental Center and environmental education program will benefit the watershed, as well as inland and coastal resources by expanding the effective geographic area that the environmental education program can reach. Also, the Environmental Center and its facilities will increase the number of students four-fold that will utilize the campus for environmental education on a yearly basis.
5. **Need:** Although the HUSD has numerous financial contributors to the project, these contributors cannot provide enough funds for the complete construction of the Environmental Center. Conservancy funds are essential to complete the construction of the Environmental Center.

**Greater-than-local interest:** The Environmental Center has always been considered a regional environmental facility, as well as meeting the needs of the local and entire Sonoma County community. The campus will acquire a regional importance in the provision of environmental education and as a staging area for students to explore and utilize the coast and other natural areas in Sonoma County. The HUSD anticipates serving 1,200-1,500 students per year in their environmental programs from other school districts within the county. Depending on the use capacity of the Environmental Center, the HUSD would eventually like to accommodate students from other bay area locations to realize the goal of the Environmental Center being a regional facility.

**Additional Criteria**

7. **Urgency:** The HUSD wishes to begin construction in the spring of 2007 so it is essential to secure all the necessary funds this winter.

8. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.

9. **Innovation:** The Environmental Center was designed to meet the rigorous green building criteria as a LEED certified building through the US Green Building Council. The design parameters included sustainable building practices in material choices, construction methods, model resource conservation, and design for adaptability. Included in the building are: photovoltaic electrical generation; low-cost solar heating and cooling; and, waste water treatment and permeable paving materials,

10. **Readiness:** The grantee is poised to begin the construction process of the Salmon Creek Falls Environmental Center once Conservancy funds are secured. It will go out to bid in spring of 2007, (lowest bidding season), and construction will begin in June 2007 when the students leave the school for the summer.

11. **Return to Conservancy:** See the “Project Financing” section above.

12. **Cooperation:** The Harmony Union School District has secured the cooperation of the School Board; students, teachers and other officials; legislators, resource agencies, other educational institutions, funding entities, natural resource professionals, and volunteers in order to carry out this project and the environmental education program. In particular, the HUSD has received a grant from the Office of Public School Construction as well as numerous other pledges of funds towards the construction of the Environmental Center. See “Project Financing” section.

**COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:** The Salmon Creek Falls Environmental Center is categorically exempt from review of environmental impacts under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) because it is a minor addition to an existing school ground that does not increase the original student capacity by more than 25% nor increase the number of classrooms by more than ten (14 California Code of Regulations Section 15314). Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon Conservancy approval of the project.