

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
December 13, 2007

BIG BREAK REGIONAL SHORELINE INTERPRETIVE EXHIBITS

File No. 07-054
Project Manager: Abe Doherty

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$400,000 to the East Bay Regional Park District for the final design, construction and installation of environmental interpretive exhibits at the Big Break Regional Shoreline in Oakley, Contra Costa County.

LOCATION: City of Oakley in Contra Costa County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)
 - Exhibit 2: [Conceptual Plans](#)
 - Exhibit 3: [Letters of Support](#)
 - Exhibit 4: [East Bay Regional Park District's 2001 Mitigated Negative Declaration](#)
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RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31160-31165 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of an amount not to exceed four hundred thousand dollars (\$400,000) to the East Bay Regional Park District (EBRPD) for the design, construction and installation of interpretive exhibits at the Big Break Regional Shoreline, in the City of Oakley, Contra Costa County, subject to the following conditions:

1. No Conservancy funds shall be disbursed until the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (the Executive Officer) has reviewed and approved in writing:
 - a. A final work plan, including a budget and schedule;
 - b. The names and qualifications of any contractors proposed to be used; and
 - c. A signing plan for acknowledging the Conservancy's funding of this project.
2. Prior to disbursement of any Conservancy funds for construction, the EBRPD shall submit for approval to the Executive Officer written evidence that all permits and

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approvals necessary to the implementation and completion of the project under applicable local, state and federal laws and regulations have been obtained.

3. The EBRPD shall provide evidence to the Executive Officer that it has implemented or cause to be implemented all the mitigation measures contained in its 2001 Mitigation Monitoring Program for the Big Break Regional Shoreline Land Use Plan and its Mitigated Negative Declaration.”

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 Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on January 24, 2001;
2. The proposed authorization is consistent with Public Resources Code Sections 31160-31165, regarding the Conservancy’s mandate to address the resource and recreational goals of the San Francisco Bay Area;
3. The Conservancy has independently reviewed the Mitigated Negative Declaration for the Big Break Regional Shoreline Land Use Plan, prepared by EBRPD and adopted by the EBRPD on October 16, 2001, attached to the accompanying staff recommendation as Exhibit 4, and finds that there is no substantial evidence that the Big Break Regional Shoreline Interpretive Exhibits project will have a significant effect on the environment, as defined in 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15382.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff requests authorization to disburse up to \$400,000 to the East Bay Regional Park District (EBRPD) for the final design, construction and installation of interpretive exhibits at the Big Break Regional Shoreline in the City of Oakley in Contra Costa County. These exhibits will be designed to increase knowledge and awareness of natural and cultural resources within San Francisco Bay and the Sacramento-San Joaquin River Delta. These outdoor educational exhibits will improve public access and recreation at the Big Break Regional Shoreline and will be used by both casual visitors to the area and by facilitated groups to learn more about the Bay and Delta.

The Big Break Regional Shoreline is located in Oakley, close to Antioch and Brentwood, which are among the fastest growing cities in the state and country. This area of eastern Contra Costa County is within the nine-county Bay Area, and is also part of the Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta. The ecosystem of the Delta in this region is under extreme stress, with the endangered delta smelt fish populations crashing, aquatic invasive species dramatically altering the ecosystem, and water supply and water quality threatened. This combination of rapid development on the upland regions and degradation of the estuarine system results in an urgent need to educate the public about the natural resources of the area and the human impacts on these resources.

The natural resources in the area of the project site are regionally significant and it is important to provide educational opportunities to learn about them. The Sacramento-San Joaquin Delta, together with San Francisco Bay, is the largest estuary on the west coasts of North and South

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America. The Delta is the source for drinking water for 20 million Californians and of irrigation for 4.5 million acres of farmland. Recent studies show that the water supply in this area is threatened by levee failure and sea level rise. The environmental education facilities at Big Break will provide an opportunity for the public to experience firsthand what the levees and sloughs of the Delta look like and to learn about the ecology of this system. Each year, two-thirds of the State's salmon pass through the Delta, as do nearly half of the waterfowl and shorebirds migrating along the Pacific Flyway.

The shoreline of Contra Costa County lacks a significant environmental education facility and citizens and groups have been working for over 15 years to develop such a facility at the Big Break Regional Shoreline. This site presents a rare opportunity for citizens to access the shoreline and have vistas of the surrounding sloughs and islands. It is expected that this site will attract visitors from the broader area who are interested in experiencing the natural environment of this region, which has been subject to significant public policy discussion regarding water supply, levee failure, invasive species and endangered species. Partnerships between East Bay Regional Park District and Los Medanos College, the City of Oakley and other groups will ensure that the site and the interpretive exhibits will benefit a large number of people, including underserved populations. It is estimated that up to 25,000 students will visit the site annually as part of environmental education programs.

The conceptual designs for the outdoor interpretive exhibits at the project site have been completed and are shown in Exhibit 2. These preliminary designs include features such as an interactive Bay-Delta watershed model, a native bird mobile, mammal sculptures, Bay Miwok silhouettes, and interpretive panels. The EBRPD interpretive staff will work with design consultants to develop final plans for the features that can best be combined into an outdoor educational experience to engage visitors in learning more about the natural resources of the Bay-Delta system.

One of the partners of EBRPD on this project is the Delta Science Center, which is a non-profit made up of a collaboration of educators, scientists, and representatives from agriculture, industry and government. The Delta Science Center focuses on providing opportunities to study and interpret the resources of the Bay-Delta and potential long-term solutions to the problems that it is facing. The Delta Science Center intends to use the Big Break Regional Shoreline to provide opportunities for students and the general public to appreciate, understand, monitor and become active stewards of the ecosystem in the region.

The EBRPD is the owner and manager of the Big Break Regional Shoreline. The EBRPD manages over 97,000 acres of lands in Contra Costa and Alameda Counties, has developed and maintained educational, interpretive and recreational facilities at many of their regional parks, and is well situated to create a successful environmental education facility at Big Break Regional Shoreline.

Site Description:

The project site where the educational exhibits will be installed is a forty-acre upland area that is part of the EBRPD's recently acquired 1,648 acre Big Break Regional Shoreline, which includes the third largest tidal marsh in the Delta (Exhibit 1). The Big Break Regional Shoreline is on the San Joaquin River in the City of Oakley in eastern Contra Costa County. The EBRPD has

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designated two Recreation Units on the site (totaling 12 acres of long abandoned asparagus fields) for interpretive exhibits, education and research facilities, trails, observation platform, a picnic area, pier and small boat launch ramp (Exhibit 2). Since adopting the Big Break Regional Shoreline Land Use Plan in 2001, EBRPD has been developing portions of the site in phases, with a parking lot, access road, restrooms, fill in the upland areas, and construction of a fishing and observation pier already performed.

The Recreational Unit is located on an upland area referred to as the Lauritzen Site, which is located next to a residential neighborhood and a privately-owned construction staging area. Since most of the Lauritzen Site is within the floodplain, EBRPD is currently raising the level of two upland areas by 4 to 6 feet. The Lauritzen Site is also bounded by an area of open shallow water that formed when a levee broke and flooded a portion of the park. In the adjacent Natural Unit portion of the regional shoreline park, there are existing nests for California Black Rails, White-tailed Kites and Northern Harriers (all federal and/or state listed species). The EBRPD intends to include protection of these species as part of the interpretive program at the site. The portion of the Big Break Regional Shoreline that is not submerged is made up of a mosaic of habitats, including alkali grasslands, tidal sloughs, fresh water and tidal marshes, riparian woodlands and mudflats that support a variety of special status species. As a result, the EBRPD has adopted a number of measures to limit public access to sensitive areas. The presence of this diversity of habitats presents a valuable opportunity for education and interpretation.

The project site has immediate vehicular public access through Big Break Road off of State Highway 4; and the Tri-Delta Transit Authority currently runs three bus lines that connect the Pittsburg BART station to Big Break Road. The Big Break Regional Shoreline is approximately a one-hour drive from Oakland and Stockton. The site and immediate area have a significant trail system, with the Big Break Regional Trail, Marsh Creek Trail and Delta/DeAnza Trail providing over 20 miles of paved, multi-use public trails for pedestrians, bicyclists and equestrians. The project site includes a small boat ramp and is in close proximity to the Big Break Marina.

The EBRPD intends to operate its Parks Express Program to provide low-cost charter transportation to the project area for schools and non-profit groups in Alameda and Contra Costa counties that serve low-income communities, seniors, and the disabled. School eligibility is based on having 30 percent or more students on the Federal free/reduced lunch program.

Project History:

The Conservancy has recognized the shoreline in the vicinity of the Big Break Regional Shoreline as a priority for resource conservation, restoration and public access, through past grants to support planning, restoration, public outreach for Marsh Creek and to support acquisition and restoration planning of Dutch Slough, located to the west of the project site.

The Conservancy has been in discussions regarding the potential for an environmental education project at the site for many years. A collaboration of many partners started working on establishing a "Delta Science Center" at the project site approximately 15 years ago. In 2001, the EBRPD adopted a Land Use Plan for the Big Break Regional Shoreline to present a plan for the proposed educational, interpretive and recreations facilities and infrastructure. Since 2001, the EBRPD has refined the design of the interpretive and educational facilities at Big Break Regional Shoreline and has taken a phased approach to developing the site. The EBRPD applied

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for funding from the Conservancy in June of 2004 and has regularly met with the Conservancy staff to provide updates on matching funds and the plan for phasing the different components of the project. At this time, the EBRPD has indicated that it is ready to implement the interpretive exhibits and has requested Conservancy funding to support this work that is planned to begin in early 2008.

PROJECT FINANCING:

The EBRPD has been implementing development at the Big Break Regional Shoreline in phases.

Funding Committed for Design and Construction of Interpretive Exhibits

Coastal Conservancy (Proposition 50)	\$400,000
Resources Agency River Parkways Fund	528,400
EBRPD Measure AA	<u>41,477</u>
TOTAL	\$969,877

Additional Funding Committed for Other Recreational and Educational Improvements at Big Break

EBRPD	\$546,494
Wildlife Conservation Board (Proposition 12)	500,000
Department of Parks and Recreation (Prop 12)	1,889,000
Department of Water Resources (Prop 13)	1,900,000
Proposition 40 Per Capita Funds	200,000
Resources Agency River Parkways Fund	1,495,000
Land and Water Conservation Fund	200,000
Land and Water Conservation Fund DDX (pending)	200,000
Recreational Trails (pending)	200,000
Contra Costa Transit Authority Measure C	<u>429,065</u>
TOTAL	\$7,559,559

The expected source of Conservancy funds is the “Water Security, Clean Drinking Water, Coastal and Beach Protection Fund of 2002” (Proposition 50), which allocates some Conservancy funds specifically for “the acquisition and development of facilities to promote public access to and participation in the conservation of land, water and wildlife resources.” Eligible projects include training and research facilities for watershed protection and water conservation including “nature centers that are in or adjacent to watersheds and wetlands.” Use of these Proposition 50 funds for this project is consistent with the intent of the funding source, since the project consists of development of facilities to promote public access and participation in conservation of natural resources, through education, research and interpretation.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

This project is undertaken pursuant to Chapter 4.5 of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Public Resources Code Section 31160-31165, to address resource and recreation goals in the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area. In particular, the Conservancy may award grants to improve public access to the bay through the provision of facilities such as interpretive centers and staging areas (Section 31162(a)); to assist in the implementation of the adopted plans of

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local governments and special districts (Section 31162(c)); and promote, assist, and enhance projects that provide open space and natural areas that are accessible to urban populations for recreational and educational purposes (Section 31162(d)).

This project is appropriate for prioritization under the criteria set forth in Section 31163(c) in that it (1) is supported by adopted local or regional plans, namely the Land Use Plan adopted by EBRPD for the Big Break Regional Shoreline and the City of Oakley's General Plan; (2) includes multi-jurisdictional participation from state, county, and city agencies, special districts, and serves a regional constituency; (3) can be implemented in a timely way because of the strong support from many partners and the planning that has already been completed; and (4) includes matching funds from other sources as described under "Project Financing" above.

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

Consistent with **Goal 11, Objective B** of the Conservancy's Strategic Plan adopted on September 20, 2007, the proposed project will implement a project that provides interpretive signs and an interpretive and educational center, to improve public access and educational facilities and programs in the San Francisco Bay Area.

**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:** As shown by the support letters in Exhibit 3, this project is supported by Senator Tom Torlakson, Assemblymember Guy Houston, the Delta Science Center non-profit organization, Los Medanos College, and the City of Oakley.
4. **Location:** The project is located within the City of Oakley, in Contra Costa County, which is one of the nine counties that make up the San Francisco Bay Area, consistent with Section 31162 of the Public Resources Code.
5. **Need:** The project could not occur without funding from the Conservancy.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** This project provides education and interpretation of the ecology of the Delta and its relationship with San Francisco Bay. Its location on the shoreline and the lack of comparable education centers in the vicinity will make this education center a regional destination and resource. The resources in this vicinity have also

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been the subject of considerable recent public policy debate (levees, water supply and quality, Delta smelt), which will increase interest in the project.

Additional Criteria

7. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
8. **Readiness:** The EBRPD has already completed several phases of the project to develop the Big Break Regional Shoreline into a park that will support significant environmental education. The District intends to start construction and implementation of the interpretive exhibits in 2008 if this grant is awarded.
9. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See “Project History” above.
10. **Cooperation:** This project involves a cooperative approach taken by schools, local and regional governments, and non-profit partners to address a deficit of environmental education and outdoor science learning opportunities in Contra Costa County. The development of an environmental education center at the Big Break Regional Shoreline involves many partners, including the East Bay Regional Park District, the non-profit Delta Science Center, Los Medanos College, the cities of Oakley and Brentwood, Contra Costa County, the Contra Costa Water District, California State University at Hayward, the Contra Costa Community College District, the Ironhouse Sanitary District and the Contra Costa Resource Conservation District.

CONSISTENCY WITH ADOPTED LOCAL PLANS:

The development of interpretive exhibits at the Big Break Regional Shoreline is consistent with its designation in the EBRPD Master Plan as a Regional Shoreline. The Master Plan defines a Regional Shoreline as:

An area that provides significant recreational, interpretive, natural, or scenic values on land, water, and tidal areas along the San Francisco Bay, San Pablo Bay, and Sacramento/San Joaquin Delta. A Regional Shoreline (one area or a group of smaller shoreline areas that are connected by trail or water access) must contain a variety of natural environments and manageable units of tidal, near shore wetland, and upland areas that can be used for scientific, interpretive, or environmental purposes; and/or contain sufficient land and water to provide a variety of recreational activities, such as swimming, fishing, boating, or viewing. The Recreation/ Staging Unit providing for public access and services may comprise no more than 30 percent of a Regional Shoreline.

The construction and installation of interpretive exhibits will help to develop the site to be consistent with this definition of Regional Shoreline, since Regional Shorelines are intended to be used for scientific, interpretive or environmental purposes.

The Land Use Plan (LUP) for the Big Break Regional Shoreline, which EBRPD adopted in 2001, designates the upland areas where the interpretive exhibits will be located as a 12 acre Recreation/Staging Unit. This area makes up less than 1% of the parkland, which is consistent with the Master Plan requirement that Recreation/Staging Units comprise less than 30% of a Regional Shoreline. The LUP states

Facilities will be constructed at Big Break Regional Shoreline to feature interpretive and educational programs related to Big Break and the Delta. The facilities may include several

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educational structures in a “campus style cluster” to maximize open space as well as structures (or portions of structures) over the water. The interpretive/educational complex may include space for reception, interpretive exhibits, observation, special events, meetings, classes, library, laboratories, staff offices, gift shop, snack bar, restrooms, boat storage, maintenance and receiving area. (p. 60)

Installing the interpretive exhibits within this Recreation/Staging Unit is consistent with and will help to implement the LUP.

The project is also consistent with the City of Oakley’s General Plan, which designates the area of the Big Break Regional Shoreline as “Delta Recreation”.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

This project involves the construction and installation of environmental exhibits in an area that has already been graded as part of a larger development project for the Big Break Regional Shoreline. This larger development project, which included the construction and installation of environmental exhibits, the project at hand here, is analyzed in the Mitigated Negative Declaration for the Big Break Regional Shoreline Land Use Plan approved on October 16, 2001 by the EBRPD, acting as the lead agency under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) . (See Exhibit 4). The EBRPD found that the proposed project, as mitigated,, would not have a significant effect on the environment. Conservancy staff has independently reviewed the EBRPD’s October 16, 2001 Mitigated Negative Declaration and recommends that the Conservancy concur with the EBRPD and find that, with mitigation, any potential impacts of the construction and installation of environmental exhibits will be less than significant. Upon approval of this project, staff will file a Notice of Determination for the project.