

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

April 24, 2008

**MOUNT TAMALPAIS WATERSHED GATEWAY PROJECT
MARIN MUNICIPAL WATER DISTRICT**

File No. 08-027-01

Project Manager: Tom Gandesbery

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse an amount not to exceed \$149,950 to the Marin Municipal Water District to undertake riparian habitat restoration and public access improvements on its land along Lagunitas Creek.

LOCATION: Near Unincorporated Lagunitas, Marin County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location](#)

Exhibit 2: [Project Site Map](#)

Exhibit 3: [Letters of Support](#)

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 one hundred and forty nine thousand nine hundred fifty dollars (\$149,950) to the Marin Municipal Water District for construction of habitat restoration and public access improvements on its lands along Lagunitas Creek in Marin County. This authorization is subject to the condition that prior to the disbursement of funds, the Marin Municipal Water District shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy a detailed work program, budget, schedule and sign plan and the names and qualifications of any subcontractors that it intends to employ.”

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:

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1. The proposed project is consistent with the purposes and criteria set forth in Chapter 4.5 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31160 – 31165) regarding the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the guidelines and criteria set forth in the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines last updated by the Conservancy on September 20, 2007.

PROJECT SUMMARY:

The Conservancy staff requests authorization to disburse up to \$149,950 to the Marin Municipal Water District (District) to undertake habitat restoration and protection, native plant re-vegetation, trail improvements and public education and access improvements on its land along Lagunitas Creek (Exhibit 1). The District proposes to protect, enhance and restore riparian vegetation, improve fisheries habitat and revitalize an existing public entryway and trail adjacent to one of the most popular salmon viewing areas in the San Francisco Bay Area, near the unincorporated town of Lagunitas, in western Marin County (Exhibit 1). The project site includes the Leo Cronin Fish Viewing Area, located on Lagunitas Creek at Shafter Bridge immediately adjacent to Sir Francis Drake Boulevard, and a stretch of land adjacent to the creek for about 2,000 feet upstream (Exhibit 2). The project site is located on land owned by the District and the existing site consists of a parking area that is mostly paved, a 1,000 foot section of unpaved roadway that was recently decommissioned to reduce its erosion-related impacts to the adjacent creek and approximately one and one-half acres of "disturbed" areas. These areas have historically been disturbed by road and dam construction and have been recently decommissioned or reshaped to reduce their erosion-related impacts. The road decommissioning and reshaping is part of the District's 2005 *Mt. Tamalpais Watershed Road and Trail Management Plan* (RTMP).

The main project elements consist of: (1) re-vegetation of the existing disturbed areas, and (2) resurfacing the existing paved parking area with a permeable surface, which would be designed to minimize erosion and storm water runoff impacts to the creek. Other project elements include constructing a split rail fence and a pedestrian bridge to keep people out of sensitive creek and riparian habitats. The hands-on restoration work for this project would be primarily achieved by volunteers at a series of learning and service events. Some other aspects of the project, such as removing the asphalt parking surface will be carried out by the District staff or contractors. The District will provide materials and equipment, supervise contractors and volunteer crews, and provide maintenance and monitoring of the project site. The District would complete much of this project using its extensive volunteer program. The District staff will be responsible for seeking and obtaining permits for the project.

Another element of this project involves improving public access at a gathering point known as the Leo Cronin Fish Viewing Area. Activities include: installation of a new kiosk for presentation of public information and educational material; replacement of signage; and installation of barriers to redirect foot traffic away from sensitive habitat.

Project construction and implementation is projected to begin as soon as funds become available,

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possibly in June or July 2008. It is expected that the project will be completed within two years.

The District is a public agency founded in 1912 that provides high quality drinking water to 190,000 people in the 147 square-mile area of southern and central Marin County. The District manages 21,250 acres of watershed lands in Marin County and includes in its mission the sustainable management of the natural resources with which it is entrusted.

Site Description: The site is a major gateway and public entryway to the Mt. Tamalpais watershed. The project area includes the Leo Cronin Fish Viewing Area, located on Lagunitas Creek at Shafter Bridge in west Marin County, which is the Bay Area’s most popular location for salmon viewing during the spawning season. The project area is immediately adjacent to Sir Francis Drake Blvd, the primary county road leading to public lands in West Marin. The popularity of the site has accelerated habitat degradation through development of “unofficial” trails leading down to the creek, equestrian use in the streambed, and trampling of stream bank vegetation. The area is rich in opportunity for habitat restoration and recreation, linking to nearly 150 miles of unpaved roads and trails for hikers, equestrians and cyclists, including the Bay Area Ridge Trail, which runs through the project area. This project will preserve and enhance the public access component of the project site, while adding some protections for native habitat and endangered aquatic species.

The project vicinity is a densely forested area adjacent to Lagunitas Creek and is known to serve as habitat for special status species such as northern spotted owl (*Strix occidentalis caurina*); coho salmon (*Oncorhynchus kisutch*); steelhead (*Oncorhynchus mykiss*); California red-legged frog (*Rana aurora draytonii*); foothill yellow-legged frog (*Rana boylei*) northwestern pond turtle (*Clemmys marmorata marmorata*); and is known to serve as nesting habitat for migratory birds, such as the osprey (*Pandion haliaetus*).

Project History: The District applied for funding to carry out this project in response to the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program’s *Request for Grant Proposals* for “Community-Based, ‘Hands-On’ Habitat Restoration and Trail Building”, a grant solicitation process that resulted in the Conservancy approval of 21 grants in December of 2007. Though staff found the project warranted Conservancy support, it was determined that it was more appropriate to consider funding the project individually, outside of this specific grant solicitation process. The Conservancy has supported many projects within the Lagunitas Creek watershed: the project is adjacent to the Ink Wells/Shafter Bridge, a pedestrian bridge partially funded by the Conservancy in 2004. Immediately downstream of the site is the Samuel P. Taylor State Park. The District’s lands surround the site providing both ecological and public access connectivity to the Park as well as the surrounding watershed lands (Exhibit 1).

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$149,950
Other sources	<u>74,020</u>
Total Project Cost	\$223,970

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The anticipated source of Conservancy funds is the fiscal year 2003-2004 appropriation (which was re-appropriated in fiscal year 2006-07) from the California Clean Water, Clean Air, Safe Neighborhood Parks, and Coastal Protection Fund (Proposition 40) for the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program. Proposition 40 funds may be used for the protection, restoration and development of land resources in accordance with the provisions of the Conservancy's enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code. The proposed project provides funding to develop and ensure the proper use of the public accessway at the Leo Cronin Fish Viewing Area and to protect and enhance the natural resources found at that location. As discussed below, the project is also consistent with Chapter 4.5 of Division 21. Finally, Proposition 40 requires the Conservancy to give priority to grant projects with matching funds. The District is providing about a 33% match of funding derived from several agency sources and from the Mt. Tamalpais Watershed Fund (administered by the Marin Community Foundation).

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project is consistent with the provisions of Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, Sections 31160-31165, which authorizes the Conservancy to award grants in the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area to help achieve stated goals.

The proposed project will carry out the goals identified by Section 31162. Specifically, consistent with Section 31162(b), the project will improve access to open spaces, riparian areas and local and ridge trails, and will improve a staging area and an interpretive center. The project is also consistent with Section 31162(b) in that it will protect, restore and enhance natural habitats, watersheds and scenic areas of regional importance.

This project is appropriate for prioritization under the selection criteria set forth in Section 31163(c) in that (1) it is supported by adopted local or regional plans, including the District's 2005 *Mt. Tamalpais Watershed Road and Trail Management Plan*; (2) it includes participation by local conservation organizations and serves a regional constituency from multiple counties in the northern San Francisco Bay area and beyond; (3) it can be implemented in a timely way because the grantee has completed planning and is ready to start work; and (4) it includes matching funds as described under "Project Financing" above.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S
2007 STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):**

Consistent with **Goal 10, Objective H** of the Conservancy's 2007 Strategic Plan, the project will restore and enhance deteriorated riparian areas along Lagunitas Creek, one of the region's most important coastal streams.

Consistent with **Goal 11, Objective B**, the project will result in new interpretive features and parking to support public access.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S
PROJECT SELECTION CRITERIA & GUIDELINES:**

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, last updated by the Conservancy on September 20, 2007, 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 District has substantial support from the local community for this and other resource protection projects. It has a very a successful volunteer watershed stewardship program: as an example, volunteers contributed more than 4,400 total hours of work to the District in 2006. Also see Letters of Support, Exhibit 3.
4. **Location:** The project is located in Marin County, one of the nine Bay Area Counties.
5. **Need:** This project is outside the primary mission of District and, therefore, any District capital improvement funding cannot be used for the proposed project. Without Conservancy funding this project would not occur.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The site is a major gateway and public entryway to the Mt. Tamalpais Watershed. The project area includes the Leo Cronin Fish Viewing Area, located on Lagunitas Creek at Shafter Bridge in west Marin County, which is the Bay Area's most popular location for salmon viewing during the spawning season. The project area is immediately adjacent to Sir Francis Drake Blvd the primary county road leading to public lands in West Marin as well as the Bay Area Ridge Trail.

Additional Criteria

7. **Urgency:** Sensitive riparian habitat is being damaged by pedestrians and equestrians, resulting in negative impacts to water quality and fish habitat.
9. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
11. **Innovation:** Part of the project includes resurfacing the parking area with a permeable surface. This innovative pavement may be implemented as a demonstration project and featured in the public signage for the area.
12. **Readiness:** The District has dedicated staff resources to this project and is ready to implement the project as soon as the grant agreement is approved. The District owns the project site and has successfully carried-out restoration projects on other district lands as well as on State, Federal and privately-owned lands. The District has an active volunteer program and has partnered with other non-profit organizations on similar projects. In the last decade, the District's has a successful habitat improvement program funded by grants totaling over \$1.5 million.

13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** The Conservancy has supported numerous projects within the Lagunitas Creek watershed, including the Ink Wells/Shafter Bridge in 2004, fish passage improvement projects in 2005 and most recently the 2007 grant for the Giacomini Ranch wetland restoration, located near the mouth of the Creek in Tomales Bay. Therefore this project builds on previous Conservancy support for wetland and creek restoration that benefit the region.
15. **Cooperation:** The District partners with a variety of nonprofit and volunteer programs to accomplish its restoration goals, including the Bay Institute STRAW program; the Salmon Protection and Watershed Network; the Marin Chapter of the Native Plant Society; the Tamalpais Conservation Club; and the Marin Conservation Corps.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

Staff has reviewed the Initial Study for the project prepared by the District and concurs with the District's conclusion that the project is categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15301, Existing Facilities. This categorical exemption applies to projects which, like the proposed project, consist of the minor alteration of existing public facilities, involving no expansion of the existing use, including the repair and minor alteration of existing parking areas, signage and pedestrian trails and maintenance of wildlife habitat areas to protect fish and wildlife resources.

Staff also believes that the re-vegetation component of the project is separately exempt pursuant to 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15333, Small Habitat Restoration Projects, which is applicable to projects not exceeding five acres in size that are undertaken to assure the restoration, enhancement, or protection of habitat for fish, plants, or wildlife.

Upon Conservancy approval, staff will file a Notice of Exemption.