

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

April 24, 2008

HUMBOLDT COASTAL NATURE CENTER – TRAIL ACCESS IMPROVEMENTS

File No. 06-060-02

Project Manager: Su Corbaley

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$5,400 to the Friends of the Dunes to finalize designs and implement initial public access improvements to provide day-use coastal access at the Humboldt Coastal Nature Center on the North Spit of Humboldt Bay.

LOCATION: Manila, Humboldt County (See Exhibit 1)

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Public Access

EXHIBITS

Exhibit 1: [Project Location and Site Map](#)

Exhibit 2: [Map of Proposed Improvements](#)

Exhibit 3: [Letters of Support](#)

Exhibit 4: [Negative Declaration](#)

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 the disbursement of up to five thousand four hundred dollars (\$5,400) to the Friends of the Dunes (FOD), to complete final access designs and to construct and install initial access improvements at the Humboldt Coastal Nature Center in Manila, Humboldt County, subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of any funds, (a) the Executive Officer shall approve in writing a work plan, budget and schedule, any contractors to be used for the activities under this authorization, a trail maintenance schedule and final detailed designs of structures and signage to be installed; and (b) the grantee shall provide evidence that all permits necessary to this project have been issued.
2. Conservancy funding shall be acknowledged by erecting and maintaining, on or along the trail, a sign or signs, the design and placement of which shall be approved by the Executive Officer.”

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 Public Resources Code Sections 31400-31409 regarding establishing a system of public coastal accessways.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted by the Conservancy on September 20, 2007.
3. FOD is a nonprofit organization existing under Internal Revenue Code Section 501(c)(3), and whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.
4. The Conservancy has independently reviewed the Negative Declaration prepared by the Humboldt County Planning Division, under the California Environmental Quality Act, and approved by the Humboldt County Planning Commission on April 5, 2007 (Exhibit 4) with respect to the implementation of the access improvements at the Humboldt Coastal Nature Center. The Conservancy finds that there is no substantial evidence that the project will have a significant effect on the environment, as defined in 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15382.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

The proposed authorization would enable the Friends of the Dunes (“FOD”) to complete site design tasks and install initial access improvements for public use of the Humboldt Coastal Nature Center property (“the Center”) as a connection to the network of hiking trails to and along the coast on the north spit of Humboldt Bay (Exhibit 1). Currently, public access is limited to monthly guided hikes on and across the property, which was acquired by FOD in July 2007 in part with Conservancy funds.

The initial access improvements to be developed under the proposed authorization include the design, fabrication and installation of a signage program, installation of a bicycle rack, procurement of portable sanitation services, a dog station with waste bags, and refurbishment of existing trails. The sign program will include interpretive signs, a welcome and regulation kiosk, property boundary markers, signs to direct the public to the site from Highway 255, driveway markers to service up to 20 vehicles, and on-site trail directional signage. The work will be carried out in a low-impact manner by hand only and will focus on minimal improvements to existing trails only – no new trails will be constructed through this project. See Exhibit 2 for a trail layout and location of improvements to be installed. These public access amenities will be installed by July 1, 2008 and will enhance public access, provide for visitor safety and protection of the resource. These improvements represent the first steps in developing the site as a "Gateway to the Dunes" which, in the future, will include renovating the existing structure to include educational exhibits, meeting space and offices.

Friends of the Dunes is currently working with the Natural Resources Planning and Interpretation Senior Practicum class at Humboldt State University to design and implement a trailhead kiosk welcoming visitors to the Friends of the Dunes "Humboldt Coastal Nature

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Center". The sign will orient visitors to the site and direct them to a self-guided trail to the beach. The practicum students will work closely with FOD staff to complete the project and install a sign by late May of 2008. The self-guided trail will have 4-5 stops marked with trail markers that will correspond to stops described in a self-guided trail brochure. The brochure will be available at the trailhead along with a visitor register. The sign-in register will be completed with the help of volunteer labor supplied by Friends of the Dunes volunteers. Engaging the HSU students and other community volunteers not only helps reduce implementation costs, but also helps strengthen community awareness and involvement with the project.

The proposed project will make day-use access available on a daily basis this summer. Staff is recommending the Conservancy authorize funds for the initial improvements to enable public use of the property before completion of FOD's comprehensive long-term plans for the site, which include the development of the visitor center. It is anticipated that in the near future FOD will seek Conservancy assistance for the visitor center.

Site Description: The property consists of approximately 38 acres of coastal habitat and includes open and vegetated dunes, an approximately 4-acre dune hollow wetland, and maritime forest. Two listed plant species, Menzies wallflower and beach layia are known to exist on the site. Also on the property is a building that was used by the former owners as the primary family dwelling, and several outbuildings. The property adjoins the beach and foredunes but is separated from Highway 255 by smaller developed residential properties. There is dedicated road access from Highway 255 to the property.

Project History: The Conservancy has worked with FOD for several years to restore coastal habitat, improve regional awareness of the fragile dunes system and increase interpretive public access of that system.

In late 2005, FOD approached the Conservancy about the possibility to purchase the property (formerly known as "the Stamps property") in order to establish a dunes visitor and education center. In June 2006 the Conservancy granted \$525,000 to FOD to complete pre-acquisition feasibility and permitting activities and for the acquisition of the property. In May 2007, FOD secured the necessary conditional use and coastal development permits from Humboldt County and the Coastal Commission, and in July 2007 took title to the property. Since that time, FOD has been preparing architectural designs for the Center, completed initial interior improvements to use the building for its offices, and has initiated a vigorous capital fundraising campaign for site renovation. FOD is requesting the funds for the proposed project in order to facilitate public access use while it completes the final design and site construction for the Dune Center.

The project furthers implementation of the Humboldt Beach and Dunes Management Plan (HBDMP), funded by the Conservancy in 1990 and adopted by the Conservancy in 1995, which identifies properties designated as Natural Resources (NR) in the county planning process, such as the (former) Stamps property, as an important site for public access. This project would continue the Conservancy's efforts to provide public access on the north spit of Humboldt Bay, and present an opportunity for a possible link to the California Coastal Trail, around Humboldt Bay.

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PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy

\$5,400

The Conservancy's contribution to this project is expected to come from the FY 2005/06 appropriation from the Safe Neighborhoods, Parks, Clean Water, Clean Air and Coastal Protection Bond Fund (Proposition 12) allocated for resource development projects north of the Gualala River. The proposed project is consistent with this funding source as it will result in new public access facilities on Humboldt County coast.

FOD will contribute in-kind resources to the project in the form of FOD and community volunteers to install signs, and conduct trail refurbishment. An additional match will come from work of the students of the Humboldt State Natural Resources Planning and Interpretation Senior Practicum to prepare and install the welcoming kiosk and the interpretive self-guided walk.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project will be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31400 et seq.) relating to the provision of coastal public access.

Public Resources Code Section 31400 states the Legislature's intent that the Conservancy have a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the state's coastline. The goal of the proposed project to install initial public access improvements to open trails for public use to access the coast. The proposed funding authorization is thus consistent with Public Resources Code Section 31400.

Section 31400.1 allows the Conservancy to award grants to nonprofit organizations to develop, operate, or manage lands for public access purposes to and along the coast. The proposed project, located on the coast in an area that draws visitors from all over the world, will result in increased public access to and along the coast of the north spit of Humboldt Bay. Thus, this project is consistent with §31400.1.

Section 31400.2 allows the Conservancy to fund up to the total cost of the initial development of public accessways by nonprofit organizations. Due to limited capital funds for the project, because of FOD's ongoing efforts toward construction of the visitor center, Conservancy funding is necessary to open the site trails in 2008, rather than in late 2009 upon completion of all site renovations.

Section 31400.3 allows the Conservancy to aid nonprofit organizations in establishing a system of public coastal accessways. The proposed authorization would provide funds to Friends of the Dunes, a nonprofit organization, to make improve and refurbish existing trails in order to integrate them into an existing network of public coastal accessways. Therefore the proposed project is consistent with the requirement of §31400.3 to aid nonprofit organizations in establishing a system of public coastal accessways.

The proposed project is also consistent with §31408(a), directing the Conservancy to coordinate the development of the California Coastal Trail (CCT), and §31409, which authorizes the Conservancy to award grants and provide assistance to establish and expand inland trail systems that may be linked to the California Coastal Trail. The California Coastal Trail does not yet have a formally established route around Humboldt Bay. However, the trails planned under the

proposed project will connect to the California Coastal Trail (either directly if the CCT is established along the north spit of Humboldt Bay, or indirectly through other spur trails if the CCT is established on the east side of Humboldt Bay).

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

Consistent with **Goal 1, Objective D**, this project will result in the construction of coastal trails within private ownership.

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective C**, this project will result in opening an area that is currently closed to daily public use.

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

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines adopted 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:** State and local elected officials, and several local organizations supported the acquisition of the former Stamps property for the purposes of developing it as a coastal education center. Letters of support for the proposed authorization for trail improvements are included in Exhibit 3.
4. **Location:** The proposed project is located within the coastal zone of Humboldt County.
5. **Need:** FOD is currently focused on raising and expending funds to complete the larger effort of developing the project site as a coastal visitor and education center and thus does not have funds available to complete the necessary improvements to open the site for public coastal access prior to completion of the Center. Without Conservancy funds, the site would remain closed, except for limited guided hikes, until late 2009 when construction on the Center is anticipated to be completed.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The Humboldt Bay area is a destination for visitors from all over the world who are drawn to northern California for the mountains, redwoods, and ocean, and to Humboldt County for its atmosphere and aesthetics. Increasing the available dunes and beach access and providing an area where these ecosystems can be interpreted will expand the appeal of this unique area for tourism.

Additional Criteria

7. **Urgency:** The property was acquired by FOD in July 2007. Since that time, FOD has provided monthly guided-only hikes, but has been experiencing an increase in unauthorized visitors who are using the property in potentially incompatible ways (e.g., equestrian use through the dunes in areas where sensitive plants may be located) and without proper introduction to the uses and resource values of the site. In order to reduce impacts to the site, while providing expanded public use, FOD must develop organized, cohesive guidance for public access.

13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** This project would further implementation of the Humboldt Beach and Dunes Management Plan (HBDMP), funded by the Conservancy in 1990 and adopted by the Conservancy in 1995, and would further the objectives of its 2006 grant to FOD for the Stamps property acquisition and planning activities.

Consistency With Conservancy Standards And Recommendations For Accessway Location And Development

The Conservancy-adopted "Standards and Recommendations for Accessway Location and Development" is relevant to the proposed project. The proposed project is consistent with several of the applicable standards, including Standards 1–3, 5, 8 and 12.

Consistent with Standard No. 1, the existing trails are located to safely accommodate public use and protect against misuse of coastal resources. The proposed project will result in preventing public from straying from the existing trails into sensitive habitat. Further, the trails are located away from adjoining or nearby properties, thus ensuring their privacy.

Consistent with Standard No. 2, the trails follow the natural topography and avoid fall hazards.

Consistent with Standard No. 3, the footprint of the existing trails will be increased and will be maintained no wider than necessary to accommodate pedestrian public access.

Consistent with Standard No. 8, the trail will connect the shore with the road with a scenic overlook (the future Humboldt Coastal Nature Center).

Consistent with Standard No. 12, the project will include support facilities to make it easier for people to use and maintain coastal accessways including signs, trash receptacles, restrooms, and bike security racks.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The Humboldt Bay Area Plan (HBAP) and its supporting zoning regulations form the Local Coastal Program (LCP) for the project area. Among many topics, the LCP policies address resource protection and public access issues. In response to resource protection and public access needs along the north and south spits of Humboldt Bay, in 1995 Humboldt County prepared the Beach and Dunes Management Plan (HBDMP). The HBDMP presented preferred planning alternatives that were approved by the Coastal Commission and amended to the LCP and the county General Plan. The HBDMP was adopted by the Coastal Conservancy in April 1995.

Section 3.30.B.1 of the HBAP identifies as environmentally sensitive habitat the vegetated dunes along the North Spit to the Mad River. The site property falls within that geographic area on the

north spit. The endangered beach layia and Menzies Wallflower are present on the subject property.

Section 3.30.B.11.b of the HBAP states that to the extent that where access development in addition to those [specifically] described in [other sections of the HBAP] is compatible with protection and public education opportunities, it should be provided. Additionally, 6.13.9 of the HBDMP reinforces the foregoing recommendation of HBAP 3.30.B.11.b for purchase of lands by private or public agencies for, in addition to preservation, providing opportunities for increasing public understanding of coastal dune ecological processes. Thus, opening the Center property for public access for, among other purposes, increasing public education, is consistent with Humboldt County planning policies.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The proposed authorization involves designing and installing access improvements at the Humboldt Coastal Nature Center located on the north spit of Humboldt Bay at the former Stamps property. Work includes the design, fabrication and installation of a signage program, property boundary markers, signs to direct the public to the site from Highway 255, driveway markers to service up to 20 vehicles, on-site trail directional signage, installation of a bicycle rack, procurement and installation of portable sanitation services, a dog station to supply waste bags, and refurbishment of existing trails.

Friends of the Dunes submitted an application to the Humboldt County Development Services, Planning Division for a Coastal Development Permit, Conditional Use Permit, Lot Line Adjustment and Special Permit to accommodate the development of an educational center and reserve at the former Stamps property. The application addressed all aspects of future work anticipated to occur on the property, including the work and improvements proposed under this authorization. The Humboldt County Development Services, Planning Division reviewed the application and indicated the project was subject to review under the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) and, accordingly, as lead agency under CEQA, prepared a Negative Declaration (see Exhibit 4), and submitted it to the State Clearinghouse for a 30-day review from February 27, 2007 to March 28, 2007. The Conservancy is acting as a responsible agency under CEQA with respect to the activities under proposed authorization.

On April 5, 2007, the Humboldt County Planning Commission, upon recommendation from its staff, approved FOD's permit applications and adopted the Negative Declaration for the project, and on April 27, 2007, filed a Notice of Determination. In its decision, the Humboldt County Planning Commission determined, and Conservancy staff concurs, that the project has a less than significant potential to degrade the quality of the environment, substantially reduce the habitat of a fish or wildlife species, cause a fish or wildlife population to drop below self-sustaining levels, threaten to eliminate a plant or animal community, reduce the number or restrict the range of a rare or endangered plant or animal or eliminate important examples of the major periods of California history or prehistory, and will not have impacts that are individually limited, but cumulatively considerable. Furthermore, the Humboldt County Planning Commission determined that the project will not have environmental effects which will cause substantial adverse effects on human beings, either directly or indirectly.

Staff recommends that the Conservancy find that the proposed authorization will not have a significant effect on the environment. Upon approval, staff will file a Notice of Determination.