

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
September 25, 2008

HUMBOLDT COASTAL NATURE CENTER

File No. 06-060-03
Project Manager: Su Corbaley

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$750,000 to the Friends of the Dunes to construct the Humboldt Coastal Nature Center to provide visitor center and educational facilities for public access 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: [Site Photos](#)

Exhibit 3: [Interior Plans](#)

Exhibit 4: [Site Plot Plan](#)

Exhibit 5: [Project Letters](#)

Exhibit 6: [California Environmental Quality
Act Documentation](#)

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 seven hundred fifty thousand dollars (\$750,000) to the Friends of the Dunes (FOD), to develop the Humboldt Coastal Nature Center to provide a visitor center and educational facilities on the North Spit of Humboldt Bay, 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, and final detailed designs of structural renovations for the nature center.

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- 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 the property 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 31400-31410 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 (attached to the accompanying staff recommendation as Exhibit 6) with respect to the development of 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 renovate an existing building into the Humboldt Coastal Nature Center (“HCNC”) and develop the site as a visitor and coastal interpretive center. When completed, the site will serve as a hub for the network of hiking trails to and along the coast on the north spit of Humboldt Bay (Exhibit 1). Currently, public access is provided at the site through trails only (completed in spring of 2008 with Conservancy authorized funds). The development of the site as a regional center for public access on the north spit of Humboldt Bay with ample parking for hikers and bikers would expand visitor use and provide access outreach and educational opportunities for visitors and local school organizations.

FOD intends to transform the ocean and bay view property formerly known as the Stamps House (Exhibit 2) into a "gateway to the dunes." Featuring an interpretive nature center, restrooms, parking, and a marked trail system, the Humboldt Coastal Nature Center will provide the community with an easy point of entry to the coastlands and dune trails that will connect to Male'l and Lanphere Dunes to the north, and Manila Community Services Dunes to the south. The linked trail system will provide visitors with access to approximately 1,000 acres of coastal dune

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habitats, and the nature center and an adjacent loop trail will be wheelchair accessible (Exhibit 1).

The building renovation will be confined to the footprint of the existing structure and will include lowering the main building floor to increase overall headspace, condensing interior office space to create a larger education/visitor room, expanding the mezzanine style second floor for FOD's staff, and redesigning the existing cupola-view room. Exterior building renovations will include replacing the roof, and replanting it with plant species native to the dunes, relocating the main entrance, and redesigning the western and eastern façades (Exhibit 3). The plans for the building renovation include constructing the project in accordance with the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design (LEED) Green Building Rating System, developed by the U.S. Green Building Council (USGBC) which provides a suite of standards for environmentally sustainable construction. The site designs include solar energy or other forms of alternative energies, ambient/radiant heating, ambient lighting and sustainable building materials that will combine to reduce the carbon footprint of the project. Exterior grounds renovation includes reconfiguring and expanding the parking lot to accommodate passenger vehicles and bus parking, and installing buildings to permanently house restrooms (Exhibit 4).

Following its acquisition of the property in July 2007, FOD carried out minor interior modifications to remove a single wall and a dropped ceiling to provide additional ambient light and to create usable space for FOD to house its offices. While the building does not yet function as a nature center and the trail to the beach has only been formally opened since May, visitors are already stopping in several times a day during the week to ask questions about access and beach use.

Site Description: The HCNC property consists of 113 acres of coastal habitat and includes dune swale wetlands, forested ridges, remnant dune mat which includes species such as beach buckwheat, beach pea, yellow sand verbena and the presence of two federally listed plant species; beach layia and Humboldt Bay wallflower. There is an easement for road access from Highway 255 to the building, across a neighboring property. However, FOD has recently acquired a 9-acre parcel, in part with Conservancy funding, that connects the HCNC's property to Highway 255 and which will allow FOD to develop its own direct access road.

The former Stamps family home, which will be converted into the HCNC, was constructed by Stamps' patriarch, Charles, in the mid-1980s. He designed it as a low profile, half-rounded building that follows the profile of the dune landscape and literally nestles into the dune sand. Vegetation was allowed to grow over the roofline to further blend the building with the dune vegetation (Exhibit 2). FOD will retain the unique features and setting of the building.

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 of purchasing 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

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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.

In April 2008, the Conservancy approved a grant of \$5,400 to FOD complete initial public access improvements at the HCNC to facilitate public access use while it completes the final design and site construction for the nature center. Work included 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 included interpretive signs (including a self-guided trail system), a welcome and regulation sign, 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.

In June 2008, the Conservancy approved a grant of \$225,000 to FOD for the purchase of two properties adjacent to the HCNC site including the 40-acre Bachofer property and the 9-acre Watson property. The acquisition of these properties was completed in August 2008 and, together with other adjacent other properties acquired with non-Conservancy funds, are incorporated into the overall 113 acres of the HCNC lands. Those two recent acquisitions resulted in a contiguous tract of over 1000 acres of protected dune habitat, and more than three miles of uninterrupted coastal access on the north spit.

The proposed 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 HCNC site, as important sites 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.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$750,000
<u>Friends of the Dunes</u>	<u>750,000</u>
 Total	 \$1,500,000

The proposed funding source for the Conservancy's contribution is a fiscal year 2006 appropriation from Proposition 50, the "Water Security, Clean Drinking Water, Coastal and Beach Protection Act of 2002." A portion of the Conservancy's Proposition 50 funds is allocated for the acquisition and development of facilities to promote public access to and participation in the conservation of land, water, and wildlife resources, including for the development of nature centers that provide wildlife viewing, outdoor experiences, and conservation education programs to the public and to students in accordance with the Conservancy's enabling legislation. (Public Resources Code Section 79571.) This project will result in the development of a coastal education center that will provide public coastal access. Consistent with the priorities of Section 79571, the project will result in a center operated by FOD, a nonprofit organization, and will

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include programs for children from urban areas who lack access to natural areas and outdoor education programs.

FOD has undertaken a major fund-raising effort to complete the funding necessary for the construction of the nature center. At present, FOD has secured \$70,000 in private donations, and has applied for \$350,000 in grants from private foundations, and in addition to ongoing public outreach for fundraising, FOD has scheduled a major public fundraising event on September 13, 2008 to and has committed to raising all additional necessary funds to complete the project. Having the Conservancy's grant secured will provide leverage for FOD's fundraising efforts.

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 construct a coastal visitor and educational center to provide public access to the coast. The proposed funding authorization is thus consistent with Public Resources Code Section 31400.

Section 31400.1 authorizes 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 authorizes the Conservancy to fund up to the total cost of the initial development of public accessways by nonprofit organizations. Conservancy funding will amount to approximately 50 percent of the total cost of site construction.

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 refurbish the existing building site into a coastal education and visitor center to be used as gateway to the system of trails on the north spit of Humboldt Bay. Therefore the proposed project is consistent with the requirement of Section 31400.3 to aid nonprofit organizations in establishing a system of public coastal accessways.

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

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective B**, this project will result in the creation of a waterfront park that includes regional trails.

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective E**, this project will result an upgraded facility that will increase and enhance coastal recreational opportunities.

**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:** The project to develop the Humboldt Coastal Nature Center has received broad support for all of its phases, from state and local elected officials, and several local organizations. Letters of support for the proposed project are included in Exhibit 5.
4. **Location:** The proposed project is located within the coastal zone of Humboldt County.
5. **Need:** FOD currently is conducting a major fund raising campaign for the project with the expectation to raise \$750,000 from a combination of foundation grants and private donations. Conservancy funding for the remaining \$750,000 is needed in order to complete the project by late 2009.
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:** As evidenced by the multiple weekday visits by people interested in the site and the information that might be available to visitors, there is a great need to make the HCNC site fully functional as soon as possible. FOD has made its staff available to answer the myriad questions from visitors, but does not yet have the full complement of tools, and space, to maximize information sharing and thereby fully enhance the visitors' experiences. In order to keep this momentum flowing and truly serve as the gateway to the dunes that is the vision for the HCNC, construction must commence very soon.
9. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
11. **Innovation:** The project presents and innovative re-use of a family home to convert it into a non-residential public use. Further, the building will be constructed to the specifications of the Leadership in Energy and Environmental Design Green Building Rating System, to create an environmentally sustainable building.
12. **Readiness:** FOD has completed the plans for site development, is in the process of obtaining building permits, and has selected a contractor to manage and carry out the project. As soon as all funds are secured, the project will commence immediately.

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, 5, 12, and 13.

Consistent with **Standard No. 1**, the facility is located safely from the highway, and the trails are clearly marked to guide visitors to the beach from the parking area. The site improvements have been designed to prevent crowding, parking congestion, and misuse of coastal resources. The building, which is already integrated into the dunes, was constructed to minimize alteration of the natural landforms and is subordinate to the setting's character. The orientation of the building entrances and parking lots are / will be oriented west – east, facing away from adjacent properties and buildings. The current access is by deeded easement on a neighbor's road that passes within 30 feet of that neighbor's home. Impact is reduced by a designated 10 mph speed limit, the presence of some plants that shield the home from cars. Though not a part of this project, FOD will construct a permanent FOD-owned road property it recently acquired, thus eliminating the need to use the easement access road.

Consistent with **Standard No. 5**, sensitive areas are protected from adverse effects by confining the building work to the footprint of the existing building, reconfiguring the parking arrangement within the existing parking area and already disturbed surfaces located adjacent to the existing parking area. The project will result in enhanced resources through the removal of ice plant from the roof, and replacing it with native dune plants, as well as through the maintenance of the trails and through visitor education of the sensitive nature of the dunes.

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, bike security racks, and maps.

Consistent with **Standard No. 13**, a loop-trail near the building, the visitor center and the restrooms will be constructed to accommodate those with mobility issues.

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

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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 / development 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 renovation and reconfiguring of an existing building to create the Humboldt Coastal Nature Center, a coastal recreational and education center for visitors to use for parking, public trail use, and site visits for group education outreach (e.g., local school groups enjoying day-use visits). All work to renovate the building will be confined to the existing building footprint: no expansion will occur. All work to reconfigure the parking area and installation of restroom facilities will be conducted in a manner that will not have an impact, or will have a (temporary) less-than-significant environmental effect, requiring no mitigation.

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 6), 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 the 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

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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.