

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
September 25, 2008

**SUNSET CLIFFS NATURAL PARK – PROJECT DESIGN**

File No. 08-061  
Project Manager: Prentiss Williams

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse an amount not to exceed \$380,000 to the City of San Diego to prepare final designs and specifications, and permit applications, and to conduct environmental review necessary to implement the improvements identified in the Sunset Cliffs Natural Park Master Plan.

**LOCATION:** Sunset Cliffs Natural Park, approximately five miles west of downtown San Diego along the western shoreline of the Point Loma peninsula in the City of San Diego (Exhibit 1).

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Public Access

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**EXHIBITS**

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location and Site Map](#)
  - Exhibit 2: [Aerial Photo of Linear and Hillside Parks](#)
  - Exhibit 3: [Recommended Actions from Master Plan](#)
  - Exhibit 4: [Proposed Hillside Park Improvements](#)
  - Exhibit 5: [Existing Conditions - Linear Park](#)
  - Exhibit 6: [Existing Conditions - Hillside Park](#)
  - Exhibit 7: [Project Letters](#)
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**RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:**

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31400-31405 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed three hundred eighty thousand dollars (\$380,000) to the City of San Diego (the City) to prepare final designs and specifications, and permit applications, and to conduct environmental review necessary to implement the projects identified in the Sunset Cliffs Natural Park Master Plan, subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of any Conservancy funds the City shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy a work plan, budget and schedule, and the names and qualifications of any contractors to be employed to carry out these tasks.
2. The City shall ensure that final designs of project improvements are consistent with the Conservancy's 'Standards and Recommendations for Accessway Location and Development.'
3. At the time project improvements are made the City shall acknowledge Conservancy funding by erecting and maintaining signage that has been reviewed and 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 the Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, last updated by the Conservancy on September 20, 2007.
2. The proposed authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding public access.
3. The proposed project serves greater-than-local needs."

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**PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Sunset Cliffs Natural Park

The proposed project consists of a grant of \$380,000 to the City of San Diego to prepare final project design documents and conduct environmental review in order to implement several improvements identified in the Sunset Cliffs Natural Park Master Plan, which was finalized and adopted by the City in July, 2005.

Dedicated in 1983, Sunset Cliffs Natural Park (SCNP) is a 68-acre resource-based park stretching along the Pacific Ocean bordering the western edge of Point Loma in the City of San Diego (Exhibit 2). The 18-acre linear section of the park, the "Linear Park," lies to the west of Sunset Cliffs Boulevard between Adair and Ladera Streets and features a 1-mile recreational trail. The 50-acre coastal terrace section, or "Hillside Park," is laced with informal trails and connects to the 640-acre Point Loma Ecological Reserve beginning at the Navy property to the south. The Park is bordered on the east by Point Loma Nazarene University. The location of the Park within the City of San Diego Multiple Species Conservation Plan (MSCP) area affords a unique set of challenges, but also opportunities for restoration and preservation.

The Park's topography includes intricately carved coastal bluffs, arches and sea caves. It affords inspiring panoramic ocean views. From the cliffs, the California gray whale can be seen migrating annually from the Bering Sea to Baja California. Below the cliffs are pocket beaches and tide pools. The beaches below Sunset Cliffs are a popular surfing spot.

In addition to its assets, the SCNP is also beset with its share of problems, the most serious of which are caused by poorly managed drainage. Uncontrolled or inadequately-controlled runoff,

originating from both the park itself and from the surrounding urban area, has resulted in severe erosion of bluff terraces and faces and in the creation of large gullies. Other problems include soils compaction, loss of native vegetation and erosion of trails from uncontrolled bicycle and pedestrian traffic, placement of seawalls and riprap erosion control materials against the scenic cliffs, and displacement of native plants by exotic invasive vegetation. These factors pose risks to public safety and degrade the park's natural beauty and coastal resource ecosystems. The City developed the Master Plan in order to address these issues and to make recommendations for improvement.

### The Master Plan

The Master Plan identifies a comprehensive set of improvements, including trail construction, erosion control and habitat restoration for the Sunset Cliffs Natural Park that are needed to restore the natural beauty of the park and to provide safe public access to its view points and along its trails. The goal of the Master Plan is expressed by the SCNP Recreation Council's adopted vision statement for the Park:

*“Create a Park where people can enjoy San Diego's natural coastal environment as it once was, free from the effects of man and intended to inspire the user to reflect on the grandeur of the sea, and the beauty of the cliffs that are Point Loma.”*

A set of objectives and planning principles were established at the beginning of the Master Plan process in order to guide planning decisions regarding development and preservation:

- Do no harm; protect, conserve and enhance.
- Maintain focus on the unique coastal resources.
- Allow public access with minimal environmental impacts.
- Maintain planning integrity/strategy for resource preservation.
- Restore areas of neglect and damage to their previous condition and visual quality.

The Master Plan contains five major elements: Erosion Control; Restoration; Preservation; Trails, Parking and Circulation; and Shoreline Access. A set of actions is recommended for each plan element and specific projects described to implement the recommended actions. A summary list of Master Plan recommended actions, along with figures and maps illustrating proposed projects, is attached to this staff recommendation as Exhibit 3. Among these improvements will be a bluff-top trail running the entire length of SCNP, from the beginning of the Linear Park to the south border of the Hillside Park, the North-South Coastal Trail. This trail will constitute a section of the California Coastal Trail.

The City adopted the Master Plan and certified a Master Environmental Impact Report (MEIR) for the Master Plan in July 2005. The MEIR analyzed the potential impacts of all Master Plan elements and identified those improvements that would require further environmental review prior to implementation.

### Hillside Park Improvements

The City is ready to begin implementation of a set of improvements identified in the Master Plan as the “Hillside Park Improvements” and is seeking Conservancy funding to prepare detailed plans and specifications, conduct the additional environmental review required for these specific improvements, and prepare technical documentation needed to obtain construction permits.

The Hillside Park extends from the main entrance at Ladera Street and extends past the area known as “the Badlands,” a severely eroded area characterized by deep gullies, and ends at the boundary of the Point Loma Ecological Reserve. Hillside Park includes two parking lots, the hillside parking lot and the lower parking lot, and several single-family houses that are owned by the City and rented as residences on a month-to-month basis. The houses are known as the “Ladera Street properties.” Hillside Park also includes a softball field, currently leased by the Point Loma Nazarene University.

The following components are included in the Hillside Park Improvements (Exhibit 4):

- Phase A – North-South Coastal Trail Construction
  - Construct a 6 foot-wide, wheelchair-accessible trail from the southwest corner of the Hillside parking lot to observation point and bench (I)
  - Construct a 4 foot-wide temporary pedestrian trail east of the existing houses (the Ladera Street Properties) from the Park entrance at Ladera Street to the observation point (II)
  - Construct a hiking trail from the southeast corner of the Hillside parking lot south to the existing ball field fence line, to include implementation of observation points and benches ( III and IV)
- Phase B – Construct a multi-use trail (bicycle trail) at Ladera Street entrance south to the Western Loop Road
- Phase C – Remove ball field,
  - Remove ball field structures and turf
  - Grade to restore natural hillside slope
  - Restore native coastal scrub plant community
  - Construct hiking trail through site.
- Phase D – Construct a hiking trail from the south end of ball field to the federal property fence line.
- Phase E – Construct a hiking trail east to the upper Hillside to the parking lot and observation point and east to the university property (V &VI).
- Section F – Remove Ladera Street properties
  - Demolish existing structures
  - Construct hiking trail across site
  - Restore native coastal scrub plant community

Trails would be graded to minimize erosion, and informal trails would be eliminated through re-vegetation. Drainage correction and erosion control measures would be included in all improvements undertaken in Hillside Park. The project would include extensive re-vegetation with locally native plants and removal of eucalyptus, acacia, and other non-native trees and shrubs, replacing these with coastal sage scrub vegetation. Restoration of native plant communities is already underway in several locations in Hillside Park. Ongoing and future restoration efforts will be coordinated with trail construction activities. The lower parking lot would also be re-graded to address on-going problems with runoff.

The trail constructed to the east of the Ladera Street Properties in Phase A would serve as the entrance to the North-South Coastal Trail until the life estate properties are removed. Once the

life estates are removed, this trail would remain as a secondary trail, with a new primary coastal trail built farther to the west.

### Erosion Control

Erosion control and resolution of drainage issues are a high priority for Hillside Park. The Master Plan recommends that:

“Prior to implementing the following recommendations for the development of the Park, the initiation and implementation of an environmentally responsible comprehensive on-site drainage study and drainage plan for the Park, resulting in specific recommendations should be developed and approved”.

In accordance with this recommendation, the city is currently completing the Sunset Cliffs Natural Park Drainage Study. Upon completion of the study, the city has designated \$250,000 to begin a phased implementation of projects specifically addressing the drainage issues.

A number of the proposed Hillside Park improvements described above would also address erosion issues: erosion would be partially prevented through the elimination of the informal trails, re-vegetation on areas of exposed soil, and by limiting pedestrian traffic to established trails. However, distressed areas like the badlands, where deep gullies have formed will probably require engineered solutions and best management practice measures. Until such measures can be taken, the City will strive to prevent further damage through the use of signage, monitoring, and education of park users, with particular attention given to off-road bicyclists and skateboarders.

### Project Cost and Schedule

Although the City has some funding available for implementation of the SCNP Master Plan, most of those sources are restricted to use on actual construction and cannot be used for improvement design and environmental review. The City must complete this design phase before it can move forward with most of its high priority projects at SCNP, erosion control and trail construction improvements in particular, and is therefore seeking Conservancy funding assistance.

The City expects to complete this design and environmental assessment phase within 18 months. Once planning and environmental review are completed and permits obtained, the City will begin implementation of the Hillside Park Improvements. It is anticipated that the City will seek Conservancy funding for construction of the North-South Coastal Trail (a segment of the California Coastal Trail) at a future date.

**Site Description:** The Park is composed of two areas of differing character: the 18-acre Linear Park and the 50-acre Hillside Park (Exhibit 5). The Linear Park spans about one mile from Adair to Ladera Streets, and runs along the narrow strip of land between Sunset Cliffs Boulevard and the bluff edge, which presents near vertical drops of 50 feet or more to the beaches at many locations. Promontories, commonly known as “points”, occur intermittently along the Linear Park. These sculptural landforms with more gradual slopes afford the opportunity for agile Park users to walk or climb down and view the water’s edge.

The Hillside Park begins where Sunset Cliffs Boulevard ends at Ladera Street, which turns east

and forms part of the north boundary of the Hillside Park. Here, the character abruptly changes from a narrow cliff side corridor to a coastal terrace of 50 acres (Exhibit 6). The shoreline cliffs continue southward, but the residential community gives way to natural open space along the west-facing slope of the Point Loma ridge. The Hillside Park is comprised of weathered and eroded land formations sporadically covered with native and nonnative vegetation. A network of informal trails winds through this section of the Park. The most serious erosion problems in the Park occur in this section.

**Project History:** The Master Plan is the result of a 15-year process that was initiated by the City to address the severe erosion and drainage problems at Sunset Cliffs Park (the former name of the SCNP). This effort was eventually expanded to include consideration of the other issues, including public access, parking and circulation, and natural resources. Although not directly involved in the development of the SCNP Master Plan, the Coastal Conservancy has been involved in enhancing public access in the area for at least 10 years. The Conservancy granted funds to the City in 1998 to prepare an Access Stairway Feasibility Study for Sunset Cliffs Beach. This feasibility study was completed in September 2000 and the Conservancy provided funding assistance to the City in 2001 to repair the beach access stairway at Ladera Street. The Coastal Conservancy's 2003 report, Completing the California Coastal Trail, identified the trail across the Sunset Cliffs bluffs as an existing section of the California Coastal Trail (CCT).

**PROJECT FINANCING:**

Coastal Conservancy:	\$380,000
City of San Diego:	<u>180,000</u>
<b>Total Project Cost (this phase)*</b>	<b>\$560,000</b>

It is anticipated that the Conservancy funds would be provided from the Conservancy's FY 2007/2008 appropriation from the "Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality And Supply, Flood Control, River And Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006 (Proposition 84). Consistent with the purposes of this funding source, the proposed project would be funded by the Coastal Conservancy pursuant to Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, and would promote access to and enjoyment of the coastal resources of the state.

\* The projected cost for all construction phases (Phases A – F) of the Hillside Park Improvements is approximately \$2,200,000.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:**

The proposed project is consistent with Division 21, Chapter 9, of the Public Resources Code (Sections 31400-31410), regarding public access and enjoyment of coastal resources. Section 31400 states that the Conservancy shall have a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the state's coastline. Through the proposed action, the Conservancy would continue its role in supporting the development of an important public accessway along a major segment of the California coast.

Section 31400.1 allows the Conservancy to award grants to a public agency for accessways that serve more than local public needs. The dramatic bluffs and spectacular vistas of Sunset Cliffs Natural Park make it a popular destination for visitors to the San Diego area from throughout the state and the country. The improvements recommended in the SCNP Master Plan will improve

the Park's accessibility and public safety as well as preserve its natural beauty for future generations.

Consistent with § 31400.2, staff recommends approval of this project after evaluating the amount of funding provided by the Conservancy in light of the total amount of funding available for coastal public accessway, the fiscal resources of the grantee, the urgency of the project relative to other eligible projects (see discussion below), and the application of factors prescribed by the Conservancy for the purpose of determining project eligibility and priority. The proposed authorization would provide funds for the initial design phase of a multi-phase project that will use funds from a variety of sources, including private donations and City general funds, for future construction phases.

Section 31400.3 states that the Conservancy may assist public agencies in developing and implementing a system of public accessways to and along the state's coastline. The proposed project would further these goals by improving and enhancing a major public accessway in a heavily-visited coastal area as part of a comprehensive public access plan.

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

Consistent with **Goal 1, Objective A** of the Conservancy's 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project would support efforts to obtain consensus and refine the alignment of 3 miles of the Coastal Trail.

Consistent with **Goal 1, Objective C** of the Conservancy's 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project would design approximately 3 miles of trails within public ownership.

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

The proposed project is consistent with the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines, last updated 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 SCNP Master Plan was developed through a very collaborative process with the local community, regulatory agencies and other interested parties. The implementation of the Master Plan has nearly unanimous support among those individuals and organization involved in the development of the Master Plan. In particular, the Conservancy has received letters of support from more than 20 parties, including the Sunset Cliffs Natural Park Council, Friends of Sunset Cliffs, San Diego Councilmember Kevin Faulconer, San Diego Foundation, Point Loma Nazarene University, Sierra Club, Friends of Famosa Slough, Audubon Society, Point Loma Garden Club, California Native Plant Society, and League of Women Voters of San Diego. Letters received by the Conservancy regarding the project are attached to this staff recommendation as Exhibit 7.

4. **Location:** The proposed project would be located within the coastal zone of the City of San Diego.
5. **Need:** Although the City has funding available for implementation of the SCNP Master Plan, most of those sources are restricted to use on actual construction and cannot be used for project design and environmental review. Conservancy funding assistance is necessary in order to for the City to complete this design phase and move forward with the implementation of its priority projects.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** SCNP attracts visitors from all over the San Diego region and is a popular destination with tourists visiting San Diego. According to the San Diego Convention and Visitors Bureau, San Diego welcomed over 31 million visitors in 2007, with half staying overnight. Approximately 6 million over-night visitors spent time at San Diego beaches and many of those traveled to Sunset Cliffs.

**Additional Criteria**

7. **Urgency:** In spite of continuing erosion problems, degradation of natural areas and unsafe trail conditions, more people come to visit SCNP each year, in effect “loving it to death.” It is urgent that the City implement the recommendations of the SCNP Master Plan with regard to erosion control, restoration of native plant communities, and construction or improvement of trails and accessways as soon as possible in order to prevent further damage and mitigate potentially unsafe conditions. The City cannot move forward with any of these projects without the Conservancy grant to complete final design and environmental review.
8. **Resolution of more than one issue:** Elimination of duplicative informal trails, construction of new, properly graded trails, and restoration of denuded hillside areas with native plant communities will help to resolve many erosion problems as well as restore native habitats, and increase safety and enjoyment for park visitors.
12. **Readiness:** Should the Conservancy approve the recommended authorization, the City would be prepared to solicit bids from qualified contractors to complete the project designs and environmental review immediately. It is expected that the final designs and specifications and environmental review and project permitting could be completed within 18 months of a fully-executed grant agreement.
13. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** The bluff-top trail at SCNP is identified as an existing section of the CCT in the Conservancy’s 2003 report Completing the California Coastal Trail. Implementation of the erosion control measures and trail improvement projects recommended in the SCNP Master Plan are necessary in order to preserve this very popular section of the CCT.
15. **Cooperation:** As described above, the SCNP Master Plan was developed with the participation and collaboration of a large number of individuals and groups. Implementation will likewise involve cooperation among several organizations. Trail construction and native plant restoration will be completed using a combination of City staff, California Conservation Corps crews, and volunteers from local community organizations. Point Loma Nazarene University has also agreed to relocate one of its playing fields in order to allow trail development and habitat restoration.

**CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:**

The Sunset Cliffs Natural Park is located within the jurisdiction of the Peninsula Community Plan and Local Coastal Program Land Use Plan (LUP), which is part of the City of San Diego's certified LCP. The Peninsula Community Plan/Land Use Plan was certified by the Coastal Commission on July 13, 1988.

On July 14, 2005, the Coastal Commission approved the City's proposed LCP amendment (Amendment No. 2-04b) to incorporate the Sunset Cliffs Natural Park Master Plan into the certified Peninsula Community Plan/LUP. The Master Plan is essentially a new plan document consisting of an entirely new LCP Land Use Plan (LUP) specifically for the Sunset Cliffs Natural Park. Since the proposed Conservancy action would help to implement the Master Plan, it would be consistent with the City of San Diego LCP.

**COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:**

The project is statutorily exempt from the provisions of the California Environmental Quality Act pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15262 because the project involves only feasibility and planning studies for possible future actions which have yet to be approved, adopted or funded. As required by this Section, these documents will involve the consideration of environmental factors. The proposed project is also categorically exempt under Section 15306, in that it consists of data collection, research and resource evaluation, which will not result in serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource. This project does not include the funding of any construction activities. Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon approval of the action.