

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
December 4, 2008

TIMBER COVE COASTAL TRAIL FEASIBILITY STUDY

File No. 08-138-01
Project Manager: Matthew Gerhart

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$200,000 to the Sonoma County Regional Parks Department to prepare a feasibility analysis and environmental documentation for coastal trail access through the Timber Cove area in northern Sonoma County.

LOCATION: Timber Cove, Sonoma County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Public Access

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location Map](#)
Exhibit 2: [Timber Cove Area Map](#)
Exhibit 3: [Northern Sonoma Coast Tier One Opportunities](#)
Exhibit 4: [Timber Cove HOA Meeting Synopsis and Outline](#)
Exhibit 5: [Project Letters](#)
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RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31400-31410 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of an amount not to exceed two hundred thousand dollars (\$200,000) to the Sonoma County, Regional Parks Department (Sonoma County) to prepare a feasibility study and environmental documentation for coastal trail access through the Timber Cove area, subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of funds, Sonoma County shall submit for the written approval of the Conservancy’s Executive Officer a work program, including schedule and budget, and the names of any contractors it intends to retain for the project.
2. To the extent appropriate, Sonoma County shall incorporate the guidelines of the Conservancy’s ‘Standards and Recommendations for Accessway Location and Development’ and all applicable federal and state guidelines for disabled access into the public access feasibility study.”

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 to and along the coast.
3. The project will serve greater than local needs.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize the disbursement of up to two hundred thousand dollars (\$200,000) to Sonoma County, Regional Parks Department (SCRPD) to prepare a feasibility study and environmental documentation for coastal trail access through the Timber Cove area in northern Sonoma County (Exhibit 1). The feasibility study will include outreach to the Timber Cove community to develop alternatives for the alignment of a section of the California Coastal Trail connecting Stillwater Cove Regional Park to Fort Ross State Historic Park (Exhibit 2).

The proposed project would implement the recommendations of *Completing the California Coastal Trail* (Conservancy 2003), which identifies this portion of the Sonoma Coast as a high priority for furthering the Conservancy’s goal of connecting the entire coast of California via public access from Mexico to the border of Oregon. Specifically, the report recommends working with private landowners to design a public trail connecting Stillwater Cove Regional Park to Fort Ross State Historic Park. The proposed project is also consistent with the Tier One recommendations from the Sonoma Land Trust’s *Russian River/North Coast Parcel Analysis* study, funded by the Conservancy, and completed in 2002 (Exhibit 3).

The project will identify the most feasible alignment of approximately three miles of California Coastal Trail through the small coastal community of Timber Cove on the northern Sonoma Coast. Tucked along Highway One on a spectacular inlet set among steep and wooded coastal ridges, Timber Cove’s residents currently have no safe pedestrian or bicycle access within their community (see Exhibit 4). A major focus of the project will be identifying safe, non-motorized transportation options that fit with the community’s needs as well as the principles for designing the Coastal Trail outlined in *Completing the California Coastal Trail*. As it is likely that much of the trail alignment will lie within current publicly-held Highway One right-of-way, SCRPD will work closely with Caltrans, Coastal Commission, and Conservancy staff in developing and evaluating design options.

The SCRPD seeks to identify a feasible trail alignment that avoids or mitigates significant environmental effects. The proposed project includes preparation of an initial study that will determine the appropriate level of environmental review for the proposed alignment. Staff will then determine whether the remaining funding is sufficient to prepare an environmental document.

The project includes the following elements:

- 1) Workshops to survey community residents, area stakeholders, representatives of principal user groups (e.g., hikers, bicyclists, equestrians, persons with disabilities) and potential future trail partners for input on the proposed trail alignment;
- 2) Collection and assessment of data necessary for trail design and placement (including right-of-way surveys; traffic, engineering and safety analysis; and collection of environmental, geologic, biotic, cultural and other resource information);
- 3) Outreach to property owners for potential donation or sale of easements, and surveys of property boundaries with willing owners as necessary;
- 4) Strategic-planning level consideration of trail management concerns including operation and maintenance requirements, as well as potential interpretive elements addressing areas of natural and historic significance along the trail;
- 5) Analysis of potential environmental impacts to the degree necessary to identify an alignment that avoids significant environmental effects and preparation of an initial study sufficient to satisfy environmental requirements;
- 6) Recommendations for potentially-feasible trail routes, trail management considerations, and alternative selection, including design option and engineering reports;
- 7) Preparation of environmental documentation for trail construction as may be supported by the initial study upon consultation with Conservancy staff.

SCRPD operates an impressive network of parks and public access trails throughout the County of Sonoma and hosts over 2 million visitors along its spectacular coast each year. SCRPD has completed a number of coastal planning and implementation projects with public input and Conservancy support, and currently manages Stillwater Cove Regional Park, the connecting segment of the California Coastal Trail to the north of the proposed project.

Site Description: Timber Cove is an unincorporated coastal community of around 400 residents. Although founded in the 1860s, most development has happened since the 1950s. It is located along a unique stretch of the Sonoma coast consisting of bluffs and cliffs, steep stream channels, open and forested coastal terraces, and small pocket beaches and sea stacks.

The community is comprised of several hundred lots ranging generally between 1 to 3 acres. It is bordered to the north by Stillwater Cove Regional Park, which includes an existing trail access point along Highway One, and by Fort Ross State Historic Park to the south, where California State Parks is currently developing new Coastal Trail improvements. Directly to the east lies a steep, forested ridgeline largely comprised of larger ownerships. Access to the community from the north and south is exclusively via Highway One, which is narrow throughout the stretch and dotted with hazardous curves. Alternate access towards the east is available via Timber Cove Road to Seaview and Fort Ross roads.

The area is largely supported by ocean and nature-based recreation at the adjacent parks, and has a number of visitor-serving facilities, including a small store, several motels and inns, and a private campground/RV park with a popular boat launch. The surrounding area is a very popular tourist, bicycle touring, fishing and abalone diving destination.

Project History: Conservancy participation in the Timber Cove area stretches as far back as the early 1980s, when the Conservancy assisted in acquisition and trail improvement projects at

adjacent Stillwater Cove Regional Park. The addition of coastal lands to the park helped secure the future potential for a coastal bluff top trail at the park.

Throughout the 1980s, the California Coastal Commission included provisions to secure public coastal access in Timber Cove development approvals, in the form of Offers to Dedicate Coastal Access (OTDs). Over that period thirteen OTDs were recorded in the Timber Cove area, subject to acceptance by a public agency or non-profit within a 21-year period. Additionally, in 1982 Sonoma County, through its Local Coastal Program (LCP) planning process, designated the potential for three vertical access points and a scenic bluff top trail within the Timber Cove area. The County's 1989 General Plan also identified the Sonoma Coast Trail through this area.

In 2000, the Conservancy funded Sonoma Land Trust to analyze conservation opportunities along a 100-mile stretch of the northern Sonoma Coast. The outcome of this work was the *Russian River/North Coast Parcel Analysis*, which recommended a suite of "Tier One" and "Tier Two" conservation opportunities (Exhibit 3). Among the top recommendations of the report was acceptance of existing OTDs before their expiration as "important building blocks for a Coastal Trail link in this area."

As a result, in 2002 the Conservancy provided financial assistance to Sonoma County to survey, record and accept a group of OTDs, which they completed in 2003. Also since 2002, the Conservancy has acted to accept remaining outstanding easements, including most recently the acquisition of two easements lateral to Highway One in 2007.

Finally, for the past five years Conservancy staff has been meeting with the West County Coastal Collaborative Acquisition Working Group that represents interested agencies, environmental groups and legislators in Sonoma County. Implementation of a Coastal Trail link between Fort Ross and Stillwater Cove has consistently remained a top priority of the Working Group's coastal access partners, particularly Coastwalk and SCRPD. SCRPD has shown recent desire and leadership in tackling the challenges of implementing this segment, and Sonoma County has a proven track record of collaborating with agencies and local partners in the planning and design of the Coastal Trail, particularly with its completion of the Bodega Bay Pedestrian and Bicycle Trail Plan in 2005.

PROJECT FINANCING:

Coastal Conservancy	\$200,000
Sonoma County (in-kind)	<u>5,000</u>
Total Project Cost	\$205,000

Conservancy funds for this project are expected to derive from Proposition 40 (the "Safe Neighborhood Parks, Clean Water, Air and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2002"). Proposition 40 authorizes the use of these funds for the purpose of coastal development and rehabilitation projects undertaken pursuant to the Conservancy's enabling legislation (Division 21 of the Public Resources Code). The proposed project will provide planning leading to development of public access and a link of the Coastal Trail and, as discussed below, is consistent with Division 21. Proposition 40 requires the Conservancy to give priority to projects that provide a matching contribution in the form of money, property or services. SCRPD is currently devoting staff time to initial outreach to the Timber Cove community, will include the project in its next round of

capital project planning, and will seek matching funds for project implementation from a variety of a local, regional, state and federal funding sources.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The Timber Cove Coastal Trail feasibility study will be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 9 (Section 31400 et seq.) of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the implementation of a system of public access ways to and along the state’s coastline.

Section 31400 states that right of the public to access and enjoy coastal resources should be effectively guaranteed, and that the Conservancy should have a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the coastline. Under Section 31400.3, the Conservancy may provide such assistance as is required to aid public agencies and nonprofit organizations in establishing a system of public accessways, and related functions necessary to meet coastal access objectives.

The proposed project will meet the goals of section 31400 by providing the SCRPD with funding to complete feasibility planning for providing future public access along a significant stretch of the California coastline. The feasibility project is the first necessary step in developing a public accessway on properties connecting Stillwater Cove Regional Park to Fort Ross State Historic Park.

Pursuant to Section 31401, the Conservancy has developed “Standards and Recommendations for Accessway Location and Development”. In order to ensure that the proposed access study is consistent with these standards, as a condition of the grant, SCRPD will be required to incorporate Conservancy guidelines into the design planning process, as appropriate.

Section 31408 directs the Conservancy, in consultation with the Department of Parks and Recreation, Caltrans and the California Coastal Commission, to coordinate the development of the California Coastal Trail. The proposed project will help the Conservancy coordinate the development of the Coastal Trail in this area by providing necessary information about the feasibility of potential alignments of the Trail from Stillwater Cove Regional Park to Fort Ross State Historic Park.

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 will support efforts to obtain consensus and refine the alignment of the Coastal Trail, in particular through developing specific alignments for gaps between existing trails.

Consistent with **Goal 1, Objective C** of the Conservancy’s 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will fund plans for new trails within public and private 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:** Coastwalk, a nonprofit volunteer-based organization supporting completion of the California Coastal Trail, has been involved with discussions on this coastal area and is enthusiastic about the potential for this trail link. Local legislators and representatives of the Timber Cove Homeowner's Association have also expressed support for the project (see Exhibits 4 and 5).
4. **Location:** The proposed project would be located within the coastal zone of Sonoma County.
5. **Need:** As noted above, the existing gap through Timber Cove has been identified by agencies and trail advocates as a priority for over six years. Timber Cove residents have expressed concerns about pedestrian and bicycle safety within the existing highway corridor. Without the financial support and leadership of the Conservancy in the development of a feasible preferred alignment, the project could not go forward.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** As a premier recreational destination for thousands of tourists annually, the proposed project will solve a long-standing trail gap in the region. The trail will become a key segment in the California Coastal Trail, a state-wide priority.

Additional Criteria

7. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The project will address regional trail connectivity issues as well as community transportation and safety. The project also has the potential to not only establish the Coastal Trail in the area but resolve longstanding management challenges around Offer-to-Dedicate easements and public dedication areas in the vicinity.
8. **Conflict resolution:** The thorough community planning process proposed has the potential to resolve numerous existing conflicts regarding providing public access to the region.
9. **Readiness:** SCRPD is prepared to begin the community outreach process immediately and has begun initial project collaboration already.
10. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See "Project History" above.
11. **Cooperation:** The project has the potential to foster new collaborative approaches to developing the Coastal Trail with statewide relevance, including in particular new methods of collaborating with Caltrans to develop the Coastal Trail in Highway One right-of-way.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The Timber Cove Coastal Trail planning area is located within the Coastal Zone and is subject to the jurisdiction of the County of Sonoma’s Local Coastal Program (Certified June 1982, Amended December 2001). The proposed project is consistent with the relevant sections of the LCP.

Consistent with Section V (Recreation) of Sonoma County’s LCP and Section 30210 of the Coastal Act, which states: “maximum access and recreational opportunities shall be provided for all the people, consistent with public safety needs and the need to protect public rights, rights of private property owners, and natural resource areas from over use,” the proposed project will provide a necessary first step toward increasing public access to the resources of the coast, improving public safety and respecting the rights of private property owners in linking two existing parks and connecting the California Coastal Trail. The proposed project will assist with many of the priorities of the LCP’s Access Plan for the Timber Cove area, as well as the LCP’s recommendations regarding the creation of the Sonoma Coast Trail.

In addition, the proposed project is consistent with Sonoma County’s recently adopted *General Plan 2020*, which the County intends to incorporate into its LCP following Coastal Commission review. Located within a County of Sonoma Scenic Landscape Unit and along the Sonoma Coast Scenic Corridor, project area planning will comply with the Open Space and Resource Conservation Element’s Objectives OSRC-2.1 through 3.2 regarding the protection of scenic units and corridors. The project is also consistent with General Plan policy OSRC-17d regarding creation of the Sonoma Coast Trail as part of the countywide park and trails system, and all project planning will be consistent with the Plan’s policies (OSRC18a-v) with regard to designing bicycle facilities in unincorporated areas.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The Timber Cove Coastal Trail Feasibility Study project involves feasibility studies for actions the Conservancy has not yet approved, adopted or funded, as well as basic data collection that will not result in a serious or major disturbance to environmental resources. Therefore the project is exempt from CEQA review pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations Sections 15262 and 15306. As required by Section 15262, the feasibility study will include consideration of environmental factors related to potential public access.

Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon approval of the project.