

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
October 21, 2010

**MENDOCINO COAST BOTANICAL GARDENS ADA ACCESS TRAIL DESIGN**

Project No. 81-018-02  
Project Manager: Joel Gerwein

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$35,500 to the Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens Preservation Corporation to design modifications to portions of its trail system to meet ADA access standards.

**LOCATION:** Fort Bragg, Mendocino County

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Public Access

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**EXHIBITS**

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

Exhibit 2: [Site Photographs](#)

Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)

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**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 thirty-five thousand five hundred dollars (\$35,500) to the Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens Preservation Corporation (MCBG) to design modifications to portions of its trail system to meet Americans with Disabilities Act access standards. Prior to disbursement of funds MCBG shall submit for Executive Officer review and approval a workplan, schedule and budget and the names and qualifications of any subcontractors.”

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 current Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
2. The proposed authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding a system of public accessways.

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3. MCBG is an organization existing under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Service Code and whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.”
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**PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff recommends that the Conservancy authorize the disbursement of up to \$35,500 to the Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens (MCBG) to design modifications to portions of its trail system to meet Americans with Disability Act (“ADA”) access standards. MCBG is located in Fort Bragg in Mendocino County (Exhibit 1). It is the only public garden in the U.S. with ocean shoreline, and receives approximately 60,000 visitors per year. It contains over two miles of trails which allow visitors to experience 7 acres of landscaped gardens and 40 acres of natural areas, including coastal grassland, coastal scrub, bishop pine forest, and riparian forest.

Much of MCBG’s trail system is accessible to persons with disabilities, consisting of paved trails with gentle grades that can be traversed by individuals using wheelchairs and walkers (Exhibit 2). Furthermore, MCBG has displayed a strong commitment to access by maintaining five electric scooters that it provides free of charge to visitors who need them (Exhibit 2); scooters have been available to the handicapped at MCBG since 1990. MCBG has worked with the Disabled In Action League to identify and implement ADA access improvements to the extent feasible.

The front parking lot includes three handicapped parking spaces, and the main restrooms, Garden Store, and lath house, where classes and workshops are sometimes held, are wheelchair accessible. The MCBG contains over 1.5 miles of paved trail that is fully ADA accessible, with the exception of three trail sections, totaling 512 feet, which are too steep to be easily accessed by most wheelchair users (Exhibit 1). Two of these trail sections are located at creek crossings. This project involves designing and planning upgrades for these 512 feet of trail in order to complete the Gardens' trail experience by making the entire paved trail system accessible to persons with mobility impairments. The project would include the following components:

- Trail survey to precisely determine grades that are currently not ADA accessible;
- Conceptual design development to upgrade inaccessible portions;
- Soils/geotechnical report to determine what structures (e.g. boardwalks, small bridges) could be supported along those portions of the trail;
- Development of a final engineered pathway design;
- Arborist report to assess the impact of the trail upgrade on MCBG’s tree collection; and
- Preparation of necessary permit applications and CEQA analysis.

Recommended upgrades to the trails may involve regrading sections of the trail or constructing elevated boardwalks or bridges in order to reduce the steepness of the grade. The project is expected to be completed by summer 2011. Opportunities for wheelchair users to access the coast are relatively rare in Northern California, and MCBG could provide an exceptional experience for those in need of wheelchair access with a relatively small investment. MCBG, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization, is well-qualified to carry out this project. It has developed and maintained its trail system for over 20 years, and has demonstrated a strong commitment to access for persons with disabilities as described above.

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**Site Description:** MCBG is located west of State Highway One six miles north of the town of Mendocino and two miles south of the City of Fort Bragg in Mendocino County (Exhibit 1). The Gardens are located in a unique microclimate created by dense bishop pine forests along its north and south sides. These forests serve as windbreaks. Together with the Digger Creek and Schoefer Creek riparian areas that cross the property and the ocean, they provide year-round moist and moderate conditions ideal for propagating a variety of plants. MCBG contains seven acres of landscaped gardens, with major plant collections including rhododendrons, conifers, ivies, roses and camelias. The eastern portion of the Garden also includes a number of buildings for administration, visitor use, and Garden operations. The western 40 acres includes coastal grassland, coastal scrub, bishop pine forest, freshwater wetlands, and red alder riparian forest.

Three rare plant species are found at MCBG. Mendocino paintbrush occurs in the coastal grasslands along the bluffs. Point Reyes ceanothus is found on the edge of the bishop pine forest and coastal scrub. Swamp harebell occurs in moist areas along the edge of the coastal grassland and coastal scrub. The Gardens support a variety of wildlife, including over 150 species of birds such as red-throated loons, double-crested cormorants, black oystercatchers, ospreys, hawks, sandpipers, plovers and Canada geese. Digger Creek is a historic coho salmon stream, and currently supports steelhead trout that are part of the Northern California Steelhead Evolutionarily Significant Unit, listed under the federal Endangered Species Act as threatened, and also supports a population of foothill yellow-legged frog, a California Species of Special Concern. MCBG also contains cultural resources, including a Native American shell mound, a pioneer graveyard, and a historic farmhouse.

**Project History:** The Conservancy has a long history of supporting public access at MCBG. MCBG was founded as a private botanical garden in 1966. In 1982, the Conservancy provided a grant of \$232,000 to the Mendocino Coast Recreation and Park District (MCRPD) to acquire 12 acres of the 47 acre garden, and an access easement over 5 acres of coastal bluffs. In 1991, the Conservancy provided an additional grant of \$2,000,000 to MCRPD to purchase the remaining 35 acres. Since the acquisition, MCRPD has leased the property for \$1 a year to the Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens Preservation Corporation, which manages and operates the gardens. In June 2003, the Conservancy authorized disbursement of up to \$100,000 to the Mendocino Coast Botanical Gardens Corporation to replace a culvert on Digger Creek at Ocean Drive that was a barrier to fish passage. The fish passage barrier was successfully removed. In addition, the Conservancy has made numerous grants to enhance public access to the coast in Mendocino, including a grant of \$393,000 to the Mendocino Land Trust in August 2010 for design and construction of coastal access points. MCBG initially contacted Conservancy staff about the ADA access project in May 2010.

**PROJECT FINANCING**

|                            |          |
|----------------------------|----------|
| <b>Coastal Conservancy</b> | \$35,500 |
| <b>Total Project Costs</b> | \$35,500 |

The expected source of Conservancy funds for this project is the FY 08/09 appropriation to the Conservancy from the Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006 (Proposition 84). Proposition 84 authorizes the use of funds for projects that will carry out the Conservancy's statutory mission (Bond Statute: Public

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Resources Code § 75060(b), Implementing Statute: Public Resources Code § 31000 et. seq.). Consistency of the project with the Conservancy's statutory mission is discussed below in "Consistency with Conservancy's Enabling Legislation." MCBG expects to provide in-kind services valued at approximately \$6,000. These services include preparing an arborist's report, valued at \$2,500, as well as project management by MCBG staff, valued at approximately \$3,500.

**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 public access to the coast. 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.

In particular, this project is consistent with Public Resources Code Section 31400.1, which allows the Conservancy to provide grants to nonprofit organizations to operate or manage lands for public access purposes; 31400.2, which allows the Conservancy to provide up to the total cost of the initial development of public accessways by any nonprofit organization; and 31400.3, in that the Conservancy may provide such assistance as is required to aid public agencies and nonprofit organizations in establishing a system of public accessways.

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

Consistent with **Goal 1, Objective C** of the Conservancy's 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will design approximately 0.1 miles of the Coastal Trail. Consistent with the strategies described in the Strategic Plan under Objective 1C, the project will identify trail segments that could feasibly accommodate wheelchair riders.

**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 June 4, 2009, 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 enjoys broad popular support, including support from State Assemblyman Wes Chesbro (Exhibit 3).
4. **Location:** The proposed project would be located within the coastal zone of Mendocino County.

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5. **Need:** MCBG does not have adequate funding for this project. Without Conservancy funding, this project would not occur.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** MCBG is a unique interpretive facility that provides public coastal access. It receives over 60,000 visitors a year from across the state, nation, and around the world. The additional 1.5 mile loop of Coastal Trail that would be made fully accessible to persons with mobility impairments as a result of this project would be a significant addition to currently available access.
7. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The lowest elevations in the MCBG trail system are approximately 30 feet above sea level, and are therefore not directly vulnerable to sea level rise under current projections.

**Additional Criteria**

8. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
9. **Readiness:** MCBG has already identified a contractor to assist with trail upgrade design, subject to Conservancy approval, and is eager to proceed with the project as soon as possible.
10. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** “See “Project History” above.” In addition, the project furthers the Conservancy’s goal of providing coastal access to wheelchair users.
11. **Return to Conservancy:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
12. **Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** The portion of the MCBG trail system located on the coastal bluffs may be vulnerable to coastal bluff erosion with sea level rise and increased frequency and severity of storm events expected as a result of climate change. However, the nature of the trail system and the broad expanse of coastal bluffs at the site allow for the system to be maintained through managed retreat over the long-term.
13. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** The project involves planning and design, and thus is not expected to generate significant greenhouse gas emissions. Improvements designed through this grant will include measures to minimize emissions in future construction phases.

**CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:**

The Mendocino County Local Coastal Plan identifies the MCBG as an important coastal resource site and point of public access. Consistent with the LCP, this project would enhance the utility of the MCBG as a public access point.

**COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:**

The project involves only data gathering, planning, and feasibility analyses for possible future actions that have not yet been authorized or approved by the Conservancy or another agency and is thus statutorily exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (“CEQA”) pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15262. Planning carried out as part of the project will, however, consider environmental factors, as required by Section 15262. In addition, data collection and resource evaluation activities conducted for this project are categorically exempt

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from CEQA pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15306. This categorical exemption applies to activities that consist of basic data collection, research, experimental management, and resource evaluation activities which do not result in a serious or major disturbance to an environmental resource.

Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon Conservancy approval.