

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
March 17, 2011

**COMPTON CREEK NATURAL PARK  
AT WASHINGTON ELEMENTARY SCHOOL**

Project No.11-009  
Project Manager: David Hayes

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$500,000 to the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority for final design and construction of the Compton Creek Natural Park at Washington Elementary School, in the City of Compton.

**LOCATION:** Washington Elementary School, City of Compton, Los Angeles County

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Urban Waterfront Restoration, Public Access

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**EXHIBITS**

Exhibit 1: [Project Location](#)

Exhibit 2: [Regional map](#)

Exhibit 3: [Site Plan and Photos](#)

Exhibit 4: [MOU for Design, Construction, Maintenance](#)

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 31300 - 31316 and 31400-09 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes an amount not to exceed five hundred thousand dollars (\$500,000) to the Mountains Recreation and Conservation Authority (MRCA) for final design and construction of the Compton Creek Natural Park, as described in the accompanying staff recommendation, subject to the following conditions:

Prior to the disbursement of any funds for construction, MRCA shall submit for review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy:

1. Evidence that MRCA has obtained all necessary permits and approvals.
2. A work program and budget for project final design and a final work plan including a project schedule and budget for project construction.

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3. An agreement or agreements between the Conservancy, MRCA, Los Angeles Flood Control District, or the Compton School District to allow MRCA, to build, operate, secure public access, and ensure that the park will be maintained for a period of no less than twenty years from the date of its completion.
4. A signage plan for the project acknowledging Conservancy funding and content of the environmental interpretive sign program.”

Staff further recommends that the Conservancy adopt the following findings:

“Based on the accompanying staff report and attached exhibits, the 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 7 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding urban waterfronts and inland coastal watershed areas and Chapter 9 of the Code, regarding trails leading to and along the coast.
3. The proposed project will serve greater than local needs.”

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**PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff recommends that the Conservancy authorize disbursement of up to \$500,000 to MRCA for final design and construction of the Compton Creek Natural Park, a 4.2-acre park located at Washington Elementary School in the City of Compton, Los Angeles County. (See Exhibits 1 and 2).

The proposed project will convert over four acres of currently unused land behind the Washington Elementary School into a new multi-benefit public park in a biologically functional native plant landscape. The park project will be located adjacent to the Compton Creek Trail, a planned greenway trail system that will function as a multiuse community asset for bicyclists, pedestrians, and equestrians. The Compton Creek Natural Park design will include a gateway to the Compton Creek Regional Garden Park Trail (Compton Creek Trail), that will link to the Los Angeles River Trail, which already connects to the California Coastal Trail. The project site was identified in the Compton Creek Regional Garden Park Master Plan as an opportunity site for a park and outdoor classroom with on-site storm water management through ‘Best Management Practices’ improvements, and identified in the Compton Creek Watershed Management Plan. The park design will incorporate these storm-water management elements as a demonstration project in the Compton Creek Watershed. The Compton Creek Natural Park is a partnership between the MRCA, the Compton Unified School District (CUSD), the Los Angeles Conservation Corps (LACC), and the City of Compton (City).

This project takes advantage of a rare opportunity in that the land is publically owned, undeveloped, uncontaminated, and has compatible and complimentary adjacent land uses. The site is one of the largest vacant parcels on the creek channel and is easily accessible by the public and users of the bike path.

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The parks' primary purpose will be to provide passive recreation, open space, and environmental education. Park elements include a plaza, outdoor amphitheater, and multi-purpose playing areas, all of which have the capacity to accommodate a wide variety of cultural activities and community events. Although not included in this grant proposal, the park will also re-purpose existing structures for a satellite facility for the Los Angeles Conservation Corps' Young Adult Program, consisting of paid conservation-based training for at-risk youth from South Los Angeles County.

If approved, Conservancy funding would be used to construct and landscape the passive park open space with site improvements such as bio-swales for storm water infiltration, site-contouring, planting native riparian and coastal sage scrub plants, and creating interpretive displays, way-finding signage, and provide a rest area for users of the Compton Creek trail.

This project addresses a fundamental lack of urban open space and parks in Compton and urban Los Angeles County. Although there are 13 parks within the City, it is so densely populated that there is only 0.63 acres of open space per thousand residents. This is far below the accepted national standard of 10 acres per thousand residents and is low compared to other areas of Los Angeles County. Existing parks in the area are mostly competitive sport fields, and none are designed with ecological considerations. The overall lack of natural open space in this area contributes to a general lack of awareness of the value of the Compton Creek channel and its remnant natural resources. Many residents are unaware of the historic creek and channel or think of it as simply a storm drain. Because open waterways in urban areas function not only as storm drain channels, but also as habitat corridors for birds and small mammals, they can provide an appropriate location for restoration projects such as this by enhancing and expanding remnant historic resources along these corridors. The Compton Creek Natural Park will provide new open space opportunities for inland communities and public environmental education, with information about natural resources, including the Compton Creek and Los Angeles River watersheds, historic creek conditions, existing storm water infrastructure, and how they are connected to coastal resources, including the California Coastal Trail,

The MRCA is a joint powers entity that was established in 1985, and is comprised of two local regional park districts and the Santa Monica Mountains Conservancy. The mission of MRCA is to complement the work of other agencies in protecting land and developing natural parks in the southern California Mountains and rivers. The MRCA currently manages over 65,000 acres of parkland and holds fee title to approximately 10,000. Since its inception, the MRCA has constructed many small and large natural parks. MRCA has completed six park projects along the Los Angeles River including the eight acre Augustus Hawkins Natural Park in South Los Angeles (operated by City of Los Angeles), and Vista Hermosa Park in downtown LA, both of which are considered model urban natural parks.

### **Site Description:**

The project site is a 4.2-acre parcel of land on the grounds of Washington Elementary School and is owned by the Compton Unified School District. (See Exhibit 3: Site Plan Map and Photos). The site is vacant, devoid of trees and vegetation, and lies derelict next to the paved playground that is actively used by the children at Washington Elementary. The site is bounded by single-family residential parcels on the north and south, the developed school campus to the east, and the Compton Creek trail on the west. Because of its size and location, it is ideal for

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establishing a significant stand of native coastal sage habitat, California shade trees and provide an access gateway to the Compton Creek Trail.

Currently, the project site is fenced off from public use and consists of bare soil and unused sports equipment. All of the elementary school’s physical education activities are confined to the adjacent unshaded asphalt yard. The current school principal supports the project with the anticipation of using the multipurpose areas to help support the school’s physical education requirements. The Compton Unified School District (CUSD) supports the project because the proposed project will convert unutilized property into an outdoor classroom with its educational features. The City of Compton welcomes the project’s multiple user features as a functioning community asset. The Compton Creek Natural Park will be a public park sited on CUSD property and it will be fenced from the Washington Elementary School grounds, with gated access for school-supervised activities.

**Project History:**

The project site was identified in the report *Realizing Change in the Compton Creek Watershed*, an implementation strategy analysis funded by the Conservancy in 2005, for the Compton Creek Watershed Management Plan. Washington Elementary School was again identified in 2006 by the Compton Creek Task Force as an ideal location to demonstrate a multi-benefit, joint-use park improvement project in the Compton Creek watershed. In 2008, MRCA received a River Parkways grant and funds from the City of Los Angeles for planning, outreach, and preliminary design, and in August 2010, a 20-year Memorandum of Understanding and Cooperative Agreement (MOU) between MRCA, Compton Unified School District (CUSD), and Los Angeles Conservation Corps was executed. CUSD agreed to let the land be used for public open space, and recreation. MRCA agreed to perform final design and construct the public improvements, and the Los Angeles Conservation Corps agreed to operate the park and maintain improvements.

The funding request to the Coastal Conservancy will provide funds for a part of the final design and construction of the Compton Creek Natural Park at Washington Elementary School.

**PROJECT FINANCING**

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b>	\$500,000
<b>MRCA (Local Prop. A funds Prop. 12 funds)</b>	<u>\$1,060,626</u>
<b>Total Project Costs</b>	<b>\$1,560, 626</b>

The expected source of funds for this project is the FY 10/11 appropriation to the Conservancy from the Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006, Public Resources Code section 75001, *et seq.* (“Proposition 84”). Proposition 84 authorizes the use of bond funds for projects that are consistent with the Conservancy’s enabling legislation. The project promotes urban open space within urban coastal watershed areas and is compatible with enhancing watershed resources consistent with Chapter 7 of Division 21, as discussed below. Also, Proposition 84 authorizes the use of bond funds for projects that promote access to coastal resources of the state and is consistent with the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Public Resources Code § 31000 *et seq.* (Public Resources

Code § 75060(b)). Consistency of the project with the Conservancy's statutory mission is discussed below in the NEXT section of this staff recommendation. The proposed project will improve existing trails and create new "gateway" connections to a regional network of trails that include the Compton Creek Trail and the Los Angeles River Trail, with a gate feature, rest facilities, interpretive and way-finding signage, consistent with Chapter 9 of Division 21.

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

This project is consistent with Chapter 7 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding urban waterfront restoration, in the following respects:

In Section 31301, the Legislature found that "developing the state's urban waterfronts into environmentally sound areas through, but not limited to, the creation of parks, [and] open space . . . "will promote [visitors], public access, and private sector development in these areas". The park will restore an area neglected and underutilized, provide open space, and provide public access to Compton Creek.

Consistent with Section 31311 the project is designed to serve the residents of the Compton Creek area as well those of the greater Los Angeles region, as discussed above. As also required, these facilities are consistent with the numerous local and watershed plans for the area, as discussed in the Project Summary section of this staff recommendation.

Section 31316 states that the Conservancy may undertake projects and award grants for activities that are compatible with enhancement of watershed resources, that facilitate environmental education related to these resources and development of amenities and infrastructure consistent with Chapter 7. The proposed project would provide a public open space park designed to provide storm water treatment, reintroduce native habitat, and provide public education about the Compton Creek watershed. Under Section 31308, the Conservancy may provide up to the total cost of any urban waterfront project. Conservancy funding will contribute to the restoration of this underutilized vacant site, into a new public open space park adjacent to Compton Creek channel.

Chapter 9 of Division 21 (Public Resources Code 31400-31409) establishes the Conservancy's role in implementing a system of public accessways to the State's coastline. Through the proposed authorization, the Conservancy would play a role in providing an important public access opportunity for inland communities, to connect with regional trails that provide access to coastal resources.

Pursuant to Section 31400.3, the Coastal Conservancy may award grants governmental entities such as MRCA to assist with establishing a system of public accessways. Funding this park and open space project is consistent with this provision as well as with Section 31400.1 that authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to governmental entities for purposes of developing lands suitable for public accessways to the coast, when the subject accessways serve greater than local needs. The proposed project will provide increased public access to the Compton Creek trail that will link with existing regional trails systems connecting to coastal areas.

Consistent with Section 31400.2, the amount of funding provided by the Conservancy has been determined by the total amount of available for coastal public accessway projects, the fiscal resources of the grantee, the urgency of the project relative to other eligible projects, and the

application of factors prescribed by the Conservancy for the purpose of determining project eligibility and priority.

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

Consistent with **Goal 1, Objective E**, the proposed project will assist the Conservancy in developing approximately 52 miles of regional trails and river parkways along rivers and creeks to connect inland populations to the coast and expand recreational opportunities.

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective B** the proposed project would result in construction of a new urban, multi-benefit park along the Compton Creek trail.

**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 Compton Nature Park at Washington Elementary School has support of the Compton Unified School District, Washington Elementary School Principal, the City of Compton, the Rivers and Mountains Conservancy, L.A. County Flood Control District, L.A. County Supervisor Ridley-Thomas, California Natural Resources Agency, Compton City Councilwoman Yvonne Arceneaux and the City of Compton Planning and Economic Development Department and partners from the nonprofit sector that include; Los Angeles & San Gabriel Rivers Watershed Council, Heal the Bay, Los Angeles Harbor-Watts Economic Development Corporation, and residents who participated in the numerous project planning meetings and the Compton Creek Task Force of which the Conservancy has been an active member for the past five years. (See Exhibit 4, Project Letters)
4. **Location:** This project will be constructed along Compton Creek channel, which drains the Compton Creek watershed, a sub-watershed of the Los Angeles River watershed and is a major tributary to the Los Angeles River. The Los Angeles River is a major source of urban runoff that affects ocean water quality and a wide range of coastal resources.
5. **Need:** Conservancy funding is needed to assist with final design and construction of the first phase of the Washington Elementary School Natural Park, including leveraging access to other State and local funding. If unfunded, an indefinite delay might occur due to lack of availability of other funding sources.

6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The Compton Creek Natural Park will establish a public destination point along the Compton Creek Regional Garden Park Trail and bike path, designed to link with other regional trails, including the Los Angeles River Trail.
7. **Sea-level rise vulnerability.** The elevation of the project site is approximately 79.5 feet above mean sea level. As a result, the site is not located within an area considered vulnerable to sea-level rise by the end of this century.

**Additional Criteria**

8. **Urgency:** MRCA is prepared to finalize design plans and start construction. Match funding from Proposition 12 and, Prop. A are available, and must be encumbered by June 30, 2011.
9. **Resolution of more than one issue:** This project addresses the lack of urban open space, provides environmental opportunities not readily available to inland communities and demonstrates urban, coastal watershed relations through its storm-water 'Best Management Practices' and the through the project's environmental education sign program at a highly visible location and destination point on the Compton Creek Trail.
10. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
11. **Readiness:** See "Urgency"
12. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** "See "Project History" above."
13. **Return to Conservancy:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
14. **Cooperation:** The proposed project is an example of cooperation between public agencies and nonprofit organizations and community groups.
15. **Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** The Compton Natural Park at Washington Elementary School will be constructed to meliorate predicted increased intensity and frequency of storm events by infiltrating storm-water on site and releasing water into Compton Creek channel at a slower rate than the existing storm-drain infrastructure.
16. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** The proposed project will encourage walking, bicycling, and other forms of non-motorized travel, thereby reducing GHG emissions from personal transportation to the site. The proposed trees and native vegetation in the new park will sequester carbon as well as cool the atmosphere in an area that experiences urban heat island effects during several months of the year. Buildings planned for the site will be recycled. The conversion of existing classroom structures to onsite training and maintenance facility to be used by the Los Angeles Conservation Corps will help reduce vehicular trips from training classrooms from an off-site location, to the project site, will avoid GHG emissions from transportation sources for crews, who will provide on-going maintenance for the site. Additionally, though mechanized construction will be necessary, MRCA will encourage construction equipment to be maintained and operated at standard efficiency to minimize GHG Emissions.

**COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:**

This project is categorically exempt from CEQA under 14 California Code of Regulations, Section 15304, for Minor Alterations to Land since the project does not involve removal of healthy, mature, scenic trees and no major structures such as bridges or retaining walls will be constructed as part of the project. The 'Natural Park' project only requires minor grading or alterations to uncontaminated vacant land, and will not disrupt endangered species, existing streets, sidewalks or the Compton Creek Trail and bike path.

To the extent the project involves replanting of native plants and other landscaping features, the project is also exempt under 14 Cal. Code of Regulation 15333, regarding small restoration projects. This section exempts projects not exceeding five acres that are designed to maintain, enhance, or restore fish, plants or wildlife where no hazardous materials or endangered species are involved. Upon approval, Conservancy staff will file a Notice of Exemption.