

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation

July 21, 2011

SWEETWATER VALLEY REGIONAL PARK RECREATION TRAIL PROJECT

Project No. 11-031-01

Project Manager: Sam Jenniches

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse an amount not to exceed \$450,000 to the County of San Diego Department of Parks and Recreation to finalize design and construct a trail as part of the Sweetwater River Trail System.

LOCATION: Unincorporated area of Bonita, San Diego County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Public Access

EXHIBITS

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

Exhibit 2: [Project Photos](#)

Exhibit 3: [Mitigated Negative Declaration and Mitigation Monitoring Plan](#)

Exhibit 4: [Project Letters](#)

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 an amount not to exceed four hundred fifty thousand dollars (\$450,000) to the County of San Diego Department of Parks and Recreation (County) for the final design and construction of a trail as part of the Sweetwater River Trail System, subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of Conservancy funds for construction, the County shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy:
 - a. A final design plan, project work program, budget, and timeline.
 - b. The names of any contractors that the County will retain to carry out all or part of the project.
 - c. A signing plan that acknowledges Conservancy funding.

- d. Documentation that the County has obtained all permits and approvals required for the project under federal, state, and local law.”

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 (sections 31400-31410) regarding a system of Public Accessways.
3. The Conservancy has independently reviewed the Negative Declaration and Mitigation Monitoring Program adopted by the County on June 12, 2009 pursuant to CEQA (Exhibit 3) and finds that the project, as mitigated, avoids, reduces or mitigates possible significant environmental effects and 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.
4. The proposed project serves greater than local needs.”

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends authorization to disburse an amount not to exceed \$450,000 to the County of San Diego, Department of Parks and Recreation (County) to finalize design and construct a trail as part of the Sweetwater River Trail System. The proposed project would improve an existing unofficial path, which is a 1.5 mile segment of the 16 mile Sweetwater Regional Trail located within the County’s Sweetwater Valley Regional Park (Park). Once improved, the trail will provide one of the final links in the Sweetwater River Trail System and the Sweetwater Reservoir Loop Trail System, which will offer residents of the communities of Bonita, Spring Valley, Chula Vista, National City and unincorporated San Diego County non-vehicular access opportunities to connect with the Bayshore Bikeway around the San Diego Bay, the California Coastal Trail and other recreational facilities within the Sweetwater River watershed. On a more regional scale, it will provide reliable, continuous access from the Cuyamaca Mountains to the San Diego Bay and Pacific Ocean.

The existing unimproved path does not reliably support all-season and multiple-use access that is compatible with the surrounding sensitive habitat and species. Current trail conditions create access interruptions for cyclists due to area of loose sand. It ranges in width from two to eight feet which is not conducive to concurrent use by cyclists, hikers, and horse riders. Additionally, the absence of a formalized trail with signage allows inappropriate informal trails to continue through sensitive habitat.

The proposed multi-use trail (bicycle, pedestrian and equestrian) would have a tread width of five feet, would use native soil and decomposed granite, and would follow the footprint of the existing path. In order to allow equestrian users to pass hikers and cyclists, there are 20 turnouts proposed that would be located approximately every 100 feet. The proposed turnouts would be

ten feet in width, ten feet in length, and would be located directly adjacent to the trail. Informal trails not part of the new trail alignment will be closed and fenced. There will be signage to clearly mark off limit areas to protect sensitive habitats, as well as, to encourage users to stay on the trail.

This trail project will provide the link needed for existing trails within Sweetwater Regional Park to connect to the west with the City of National City, forming an integral link to the South San Diego Bay coastal area of the City of San Diego and City of Coronado via the Bayshore Bikeway, which serves as a segment of the regional and statewide California Coastal Trail. This trail segment will also facilitate connection to the City of Chula Vista and the Eastern San Diego County trail system which extend from the City of Chula Vista's Eastern Boundary to the Tecate Mexican Border. The Sweetwater River and Loop Trail's connection to the historic California Riding and Hiking Trail in Crest/Dehesa will provide continuous access from the ocean to the mountains of Cuyamaca and then onward to the Riverside County Line. All told, the Sweetwater Regional Trail provides a vital east-west access link in the County's 1,146 mile trail network.

San Diego County Department of Parks and Recreation maintains and enhances the quality of life in San Diego County by providing parks and recreational opportunities for residents and visitors. Their award winning parks system includes local and regional parks, campgrounds, 300 miles of trails, fishing lakes, state-of-the-art recreation centers and sports complexes, ecological preserves, and open space preserves.

Site Description:

The proposed project is located within the Sweetwater Regional Park between the park's Western Staging Area to the northeast of the intersection of Bonita Road and Plaza Bonita Road, and continuing east to the project terminus at the east side of the Willow Street bridge. The project's western terminus will connect to an existing and improved trail located just west of the staging area parking lot. The trail project is located in the lower Sweetwater River, approximately three miles southwest of Sweetwater Reservoir. This reach of the Sweetwater River is characterized by native riparian forest and contains significant groves of southern willow riparian forest, southern cottonwood-willow riparian forest, southern willow scrub and coastal brackish marsh that provide excellent potential nesting habitat for many native avian species, including least Bell's vireo and several raptors. The eastern portion of the project site passes through the Sweetwater Offsite Mitigation Area (SWOMA). While this project does not involve habitat restoration or mitigation credits, mitigation projects for other area projects have, and will continue to occur adjacent to the project, further improving the native habitat of the trail area.

The trail is sited within the floodplain of the Sweetwater River along an existing unimproved path. Surrounding land uses include residential developments to the north and south, commercial to the south, and the Chula Vista Municipal Golf Course to the east. The residential community to the north of the project includes horse properties which provide equestrian trail users. There is a golf driving range adjacent to the trail project and within the floodplain on the southeastern portion of the site.

The Sweetwater River in Southern San Diego County runs approximately 55 miles from its headwaters in the Cuyamaca Mountains to the Sweetwater Marsh in the San Diego Bay National Wildlife Refuge. The watershed drains approximately 230 square miles of primarily

unincorporated San Diego County and is the largest watershed unit in the greater San Diego Bay watershed. More than 300,000 people currently reside within the Sweetwater River watershed, and this amount is projected to increase to 365,000 by 2015. Between the headwaters and the outlet to San Diego Bay, the watershed contains a variety of habitat types including oak and pine woodlands, riparian forest, chaparral, coastal sage scrub, and coastal salt marsh. The upper watershed contains large undeveloped areas within the Cleveland National Forest and Cuyamaca Rancho State Park. Unincorporated rural and suburban communities characterize the central part of the watershed. The urbanized lower portion of the Sweetwater watershed contains portions of several cities including San Diego, National City, Chula Vista, La Mesa, and Lemon Grove.

Project History:

In January of 2005, the San Diego Board of Supervisors unanimously adopted the San Diego County Community Trails Master Plan, formalizing decades of effort by trail and access advocates. *The Sweetwater Community Trails and Pathways Plan* chapter of this document identified the Sweetwater Regional Trail as the sole “Priority 1” project. The Sweetwater Regional Trail is comprised of the Sweetwater River Trail as well as the Sweetwater Loop Trail. The County Trails System Assessment of 2001 identified a minimum baseline of 11 miles of trails for the Sweetwater community based on a population equation. Completion of the Sweetwater Regional trail will provide 16 miles of community trails, eclipsing that goal and providing linkages to hundreds of miles of other trails in the county trail system. Many Sweetwater Regional Trail segments have been completed since the adoption of the Community Trails Master Plan, with many partners and funding sources.

In 2008, Conservancy staff solicited proposals for access projects in San Diego County. This proposed project is one of the priority projects identified by staff. It provides an important link between inland communities and the Bayshore Bikeway, also identified as a high priority through the solicitation and recently authorized to receive funding from the Conservancy. The Bayshore Bikeway is an important section of the California Coastal Trail in San Diego County.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	450,000.0
County of San Diego	<u>135,000.0</u>
Total Project Costs	585,000.0

The expected source of funds for this project is the FY 2009/2010 appropriation to the Conservancy from the Safe Neighborhood Parks, Clean Water, Clean Air, and Coastal Protection Bond Fund, Public Resources Code section 75001 *et seq.* (Proposition 84). This funding may be expended, consistent with the Conservancy’s enabling statutes, for the protection and enjoyment of San Diego Bay and adjacent watersheds as specified in Section 75060(f) of the Public Resources Code. Proposition 84 defines protection activities to include actions “necessary to allow the continued use and enjoyment of property or natural resources. . . .” (Pub. Res. Code § 75005(m)). As specified in Section 75072.6, "San Diego Bay and adjacent watersheds" includes the coastal and bay watersheds within San Diego County, such as the Sweetwater River

Watershed. The project is undertaken consistent with Chapter 9 of the Conservancy's enabling statute, as discussed below.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project would be consistent with Chapter 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code Sections 31400-31410, which directs the Conservancy to take a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the state's coastline. The project would be consistent with Section 31400.1, which authorizes the Conservancy to award access development grants to any public agency, provided that the resulting public accessways will serve more than local public needs. The Sweetwater River Recreation Trail, when completed, will provide access to the coast for several inland communities.

Section 31400.2 authorizes the Conservancy to provide up to the total cost of the initial development of a public accessway by any public agency, and the amount of funding provided by the conservancy shall be determined by the total amount of funding available for coastal public accessway projects, the fiscal resources of the applicant, the urgency of the project relative to other eligible projects, and the application of factors prescribed by the Conservancy. Consistent with this section, the proposed amount of the Conservancy contribution was determined based on the total amount of funding available to the Conservancy for public access projects, the matching funds provided by the grantee (see Project Financing), and the Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria, including project urgency (See Consistency with Conservancy's Project Selection Criteria & Guidelines). The County of San Diego has committed to paying a significant portion of the total project costs.

Consistent with Section 31400.3, the project would aid the County in establishing a system of public coastal accessways. This trail project will provide the link needed for existing trails within Sweetwater Regional Park to connect to the west with the City of National City, forming an integral link to the South San Diego Bay coastal area of the City of San Diego and City of Coronado via the Bayshore Bikeway, which serves as a segment of the regional and statewide California Coastal Trail.

Section 31409 authorizes the Conservancy to award grants and provide assistance to public agencies to establish and expand those inland trail systems that may be linked to the California Coastal Trail. The County of San Diego Department of Parks and Recreation is a public agency that owns the Sweetwater Regional Park on which the Sweetwater Regional Trail traverses and eventually connects to the California Coastal Trail and is thus eligible for Conservancy assistance under this section.

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

Consistent with **Goal 1, Objective 1E** of the Conservancy's 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project would provide a design for a regional trail that connects inland populations to the coast and expands recreational opportunities.

Consistent with **Goal 1, Objective 1F** of the Conservancy's 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project would implement a project that connects inland populations to the coast and expands recreational opportunities.

**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 County Board of Supervisors, Cities of Chula Vista and San Diego, The Sweetwater/Bonita County Service Area Planning Group, and the residents of the outlying communities fully support this project. The County has been working with the communities of Spring Valley, Bonita, and Jamul to expand non-motorized recreational trail opportunities within their boundaries.
4. **Location:** The project is located in the unincorporated area of Bonita in San Diego County and provides a necessary link to coastal access via trail from interior areas.
5. **Need:** If this proposal is not selected for funding, the project will be postponed until the County can find alternative funding. Postponement could result in additional improvised trails being established through important habitat. Conservancy funding would help to formalize an appropriate trail placement.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** This trail project will provide the link needed for existing trails within Sweetwater Regional Park that connects to the City of Chula Vista and the Eastern San Diego County trail system. Connections from the Sweetwater Regional Park Trail system facilitate access to the Tecate Mexican Border, to the historic California Riding and Hiking Trail in Crest/Dehesa, and will provide continuous access from the ocean to the mountains of Cuyamaca and then onward to the Riverside County Line. This trail will also connect to the west with the City of National City and is an integral link to the South Bay coastal area of the City of San Diego and City of Coronado via the Bay Shore Bikeway, which serves as a segment of the regional and statewide California Coastal Trail.
7. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** This project is located in inland San Diego County and is not subject to sea level rise impacts.

Additional Criteria

10. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
13. **Readiness:** The County is prepared to complete final designs by December of 2011 with construction scheduled to begin in early 2012.

14. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See “Project History” above.

18. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** The trail project involves minimal grading with construction equipment. The majority of the trail construction will involve improvements to existing informal trails and will be constructed by the California Conservation Corps (CCC). Where possible, the project will incorporate best management practices to minimize greenhouse gas emissions, such as:

- a) When mechanized equipment is used, idling times and speed limits will be strictly enforced to reduce emissions potential,
- b) Mechanized equipment will be properly maintained and operated,
- c) Native and locally sourced materials will be used for trails construction,
- d) The CCC will use vanpooling for work crews for the duration of the project,
- e) Plant material that is cleared for the project will be mulched on site or at other regional parks,
- f) The project is a link to a trail that provides regional access to other destinations, reducing automotive reliance for transportation to those sites.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:

The project is located immediately outside the coastal zone in the City of San Diego, but it will provide trails which will lead to coastal trails. The Coastal Act specifically addresses public access. Public Resources Code Section 30210 mandates that:

In carrying out the requirements of Section 4 of Article X of the California Constitution, maximum access, which shall be conspicuously posted, and recreational opportunities shall be provided for all the people consistent with the public safety needs and the need to protect public rights, rights of private property owners and natural resource areas from overuse.

The trails planned under this project will increase the ability of pedestrians to reach coastal trails and bikeways in the lower Sweetwater River Watershed and San Diego Bay. The City of San Diego’s certified Local Coastal Program (LCP) calls for maximum feasible public access to the coastal areas through use of coordinated linkages between pedestrian street crossings, pedestrian bridges, and an improved bikeway system.

CONSISTENCY WITH THE CONSERVANCY’S STANDARDS AND RECOMMENDATIONS FOR ACCESSWAY LOCATION AND DEVELOPMENT:

The project is consistent with the Coastal Conservancy’s Standards and Recommendations for Accessway Location and Development. In particular:

Standard No. 1, Protect the Public and Coastal Resources: The accessway design for this project minimizes alterations of natural landforms while protecting against impacts to environmentally sensitive habitats and adjacent private residences. Informal trails not part of the trail alignment will be closed and fenced. There will be signage to clearly mark off-limit areas to protect sensitive habitats, as well as, to encourage users to stay on the trail.

Standard No. 2, Correct Hazards: This project will not increase the potential of any hazard

and will correct potential hazards in the project area. Some areas of dense non-native growth will be cleared for trail construction, reducing fire hazards. Additionally, informal trails that are not part of the trail alignment will be closed and fenced, reducing erosion hazards in the project area.

Standard No. 5, Environmentally Sensitive Areas: The project design includes components such as split log fencing that will protect sensitive habitat within the project area by restricting access to those areas. Where inappropriate access is currently possible, access will be restricted creating a net benefit to environmentally sensitive areas.

Standard No. 8, Trails: This project connects inland units of local park systems to the coast. The project design addresses appropriate drainage and includes access amenities such as trash receptacles, interpretive signage, benches, and barriers to sensitive habitat areas.

Standard No. 12, Support Facilities: This project includes support facilities that enhance the use and maintenance of the accessway. (See “Standard No. 8, Trails”)

Standard No. 13, Barrier-Free Access: The County will be using accessibility design standards established by the “*County Trails Program Community Trails Master Plan.*” The trail improvements will generally be wheelchair-accessible and consistent with the Americans with Disabilities Act of 1990 due to the relatively flat topography of the trail. However, portions of the trail are designated for a “primitive” trail plan and are intended for a more distinct wilderness experience. As such, these “primitive” trails involve a minimal trail width that may limit access to some user groups.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

Pursuant to CEQA, the County, as lead agency, prepared an initial study and Mitigated Negative Declaration for the Sweetwater Trail Phase III project (Exhibit 3). A notice of determination was filed with the State Clearinghouse on June 19, 2009. On June 12, 2009, the County adopted the Mitigated Negative Declaration and Mitigation Monitoring Program.

CEQA requires consideration of potential environmental effects of agency actions and approvals, unless exempt. The Mitigated Negative Declaration identified potentially significant impacts of the proposed project in the area of biological resources. Mitigation measures were proposed and adopted to ensure that these potential impacts are avoided or reduced to *less-than-significant* levels as summarized here:

Biological Resources:

According to the Biological Technical Report for the Sweetwater River Phase III Trail Project prepared by RECON Environmental Inc. dated April 2009, five sensitive avian species are known, or have a high potential to occur, in the project vicinity including: federally endangered least Bell’s vireo; CDFG Species of Special Concern yellow breasted chat, yellow warbler, and Cooper’s hawk; and western bluebird, a locally rare species. Although the project site supports native biological habitat for these and other species, the incremental removal of this habitat for trail preparation will not result in substantial impacts with mitigation. Vegetation removal, grading, clearing and any other construction related activities will be restricted during the

breeding season (February 1 to September 15 of any year) within 300 feet (500 feet for raptors) of natural habitat for raptors, least Bell's vireo, and other migratory birds. Removal of trees or other potential nesting sites shall be avoided during the raptor breeding season of January 1 to August 30 in order to avoid direct or indirect impacts to raptor species. If a qualified biologist determines that no nesting birds are present within the 300 foot (500 feet for raptors) radius, construction may proceed with written concurrence from FWS and DFG. Biological monitoring will be required during construction to evaluate the potential for indirect impacts to raptors, migratory birds and other sensitive biological resources within SWOMA.

A total of 1.023 acres of vegetation communities will be permanently impacted, and a total of 0.035 acre of vegetation communities will be temporarily impacted by the proposed project. Within the impact areas, five sensitive vegetation communities, including southern arroyo willow riparian forest, southern willow scrub, southern cottonwood-willow riparian forest, coastal brackish marsh, and disturbed Diegan coastal sage scrub, will be permanently impacted. Temporary impacts are proposed within one sensitive vegetation community, southern arroyo willow riparian forest. Mitigation for these impacts to southern arroyo willow riparian forest, southern cottonwood-willow riparian forest, southern willow scrub, coastal brackish marsh and disturbed Diegan coastal sage scrub, will include restoration and enhancement of 0.131 acre of rogue trails (2:1 ratio) within SWOMA for impacts within SWOMA and 0.313 acre of rogue trails (1:1 ratio) within or outside SWOMA for impacts outside SWOMA. Restoration and enhancement will consist of rogue trail closure and re-establishment of native riparian species. These mitigation measures will result in a net gain of suitable habitat.

As an additional precautionary measure, directed surveys for Singlewhorl burrobrush (*Ambrosia monogyra*) and San Diego sagewort (*Artemisia palmeri*) will be conducted during the Spring season prior to the beginning of construction to determine if these or other sensitive spring-blooming plant species are present within the trail footprint.

The proposed project will also incorporate several measures to further reduce the risk of impacts to biological resources. Prior to the commencement of construction, all construction and staging area limits will be clearly defined with orange construction fencing and all activities will take place within the established site limits. Physical and/or visual barriers will be incorporated to protect sensitive habitat and species and will direct users to designated trails. Natural drainage patterns will be maintained to the extent practicable during construction activities through use of erosion control techniques including, but not limited to, the use of gravel bags, sediment traps, silt fences, fiber rolls and storm drain inlet protection.

Conservancy Staff has independently reviewed the Mitigated Negative Declaration prepared by the County. Based on that review, staff concurs that the project to be funded by the Conservancy, as mitigated, does not have the potential for a significant effect on the environment. Staff, therefore, recommends that the Conservancy find that there is no substantial evidence that the project, as mitigated, will result in a significant effect on the environment as defined in 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15382. Upon approval, staff will file a Notice of Determination for the project.