

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
September 22, 2011

**ARCATA MARSH AND WILDLIFE SANCTUARY INTERPRETIVE SIGNAGE**

Project No. 11-035-01  
Project Manager: Su Corbaley

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$25,500 to the City of Arcata to design, produce and install interpretive and directional signage at the Arcata Marsh and Wildlife Sanctuary, in Arcata, Humboldt County.

**LOCATION:** Arcata, Humboldt County (Exhibit 1)

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Public Access

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**EXHIBITS**

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

Exhibit 2: [Current Interpretive Signs](#)

Exhibit 3: [Example Sign](#)

Exhibit 4: [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 twenty-five thousand five hundred dollars (\$25,500) to the City of Arcata for the purposes of designing, producing and installing interpretive and directional signage at the Arcata Marsh and Wildlife Sanctuary, in Arcata, Humboldt County. Prior to the disbursement of funds, the City of Arcata shall submit for the written approval of the Conservancy’s Executive Officer a work program, budget, names of any contractors it intends to employ for the project, and a plan to acknowledge the Conservancy funding.”

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 project 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 will serve greater than local need.”

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**PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize the disbursement of up to twenty-five thousand five hundred dollars (\$25,500) to the City of Arcata (“the City”) to design, produce and install interpretive and directional signage at the Arcata Marsh and Wildlife Sanctuary (“AMWS”), in Arcata, Humboldt County (Exhibit 1). The proposed project will replace and update the current signs with 12 new interpretive signs, and improve way-finding on the trails by installing 12 directional markers all through the AMWS. The existing signs are dated, do not have a coherent visual theme, and do not provide the public with an interpretation of the marsh system’s rich and diverse natural resources (Exhibit 2).

The new interpretive signs will follow the designs from the Humboldt Bay Interpretive Signing Manual (developed by the Redwood Community Action Agency with Conservancy funding) and will include pedestals designed to mimic their settings (e.g., fabricated to look like cattails, coastal shrubs, etc.). The pedestals will be constructed of weather- and vandal-resistant metal; the interpretive panels will be constructed of long lasting weather-proof resins designed to resist vandalism (Exhibit 3). The directional signs will incorporate way finding information such as arrows and maps.

The City expects to work directly with a contractor to design and approve the signs. A nonprofit organization, Friends of Arcata Marsh (“FOAM”), will work with city staff to volunteer their time to install the signs.

The City has managed and maintained the AMWS for public access, and natural resource and waterside recreation since its formal dedication in 1981 with ever increasing numbers of visitors to the AMWS. The City’s most recent car and visitor counts from 2010 indicate approximately 75,000 people visit the AMWS per year and that approximately 40 percent are from outside of the Humboldt Bay region. Thus, the City has shown its capacity and capability to implement the proposed project.

**Site Description:** Arcata Marsh and Wildlife Sanctuary encompasses 307 acres of freshwater marshes, salt marshes, tidal sloughs, grassy uplands, mudflats, brackish marsh and a recreational freshwater lake at the northern edge of Humboldt Bay in the City of Arcata. The AMWS is situated along the Pacific Flyway and provides homes and resting places for over 270 species of birds, including seventy-three species that have been observed to live there year-round. The freshwater marshes and lake have small islands that provide protected resting areas for birds. In addition to the vast number of species of birds, the AMWS provides habitat for numerous species of plants, mammals, insects and amphibians.

Public access is accommodated at the AMWS through the approximately five miles of walking and biking paths that meander along the levee-top trails to Humboldt Bay for boat launching at

the only bay access point in the City of Arcata, as well as to the several bank fishing sites at the recreational freshwater lake.

**Project History:** The Conservancy has a long history assisting the City to develop the Arcata Marsh and Wildlife Sanctuary for the benefit and enjoyment of the public at large. Between 1979 and 1985, following the completion of planning and feasibility studies in 1978, the Conservancy awarded funds to the City to purchase properties (to add to the City’s existing adjacent holdings in the project area), construct the freshwater marshes, and breach dikes to open adjacent former salt marshes to tidal flow. Particular to the proposed project, one of the grants was for the installation of support facilities - trails, picnic tables, benches, bird watching areas, fences and signs - prior to the formal dedication of the AMWS and opening in 1981.

Over the last two years, the City has invested a considerable amount of funding to upgrade trails and recreational seating, bird blinds and has completely renovated the main entry drive within the Marsh and Wildlife Sanctuary. In light of all these improvements, the need to replace and update the nearly 30-year-old interpretative displays became evident. Thus, the City approached the Conservancy to seek assistance to replace the signs and improve the visitor experience with directional signage.

**PROJECT FINANCING**

Coastal Conservancy	\$25,500
City of Arcata	\$7,800
Friends of Arcata Marsh (in-kind)	<u>\$7,200</u>
<b>Total Project Costs</b>	<b>\$40,500</b>

The anticipated source for the Conservancy funds for this project is an appropriation 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 promote access to the coastal resources of the state and are consistent with the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Public Resources Code section 31000 et seq. (Public Resources Code § 75060(b)). Consistency of the project with the Conservancy’s statutory mission is discussed below in “Consistency with Conservancy’s Enabling Legislation.” The proposed project will support improved access to the Arcata Marsh and Wildlife Sanctuary, a popular visitor destination on Humboldt Bay.

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

The proposed project will be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 9 (Sections 31400 et seq.) of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the state’s coastline.

Section 31400 acknowledges the principal role the Legislature has assigned to the Conservancy in implementing a system of public accessways along the coast of California. Section 31400.1 authorizes the Conservancy to award a grant to any local public agency or nonprofit organization to develop and manage lands for public access to and along the coast. The project must serve more than local needs. The proposed project is consistent with this section as the City is a local

agency managing a system of public access along the coastal resources of Humboldt Bay. Consistent with this section, the updated signs will improve the coastal access experience at the AMWS, a location that attracts visitors from local and distant areas.

Section 31400.1 allows the Conservancy to award grants to a public agency for development of accessways to and along the coast that serve more than local public needs.

Section 31400.3 authorizes the Conservancy to provide such assistance as is required to aid public agencies and nonprofit organizations in establishing a system of public coastal accessways, and related functions necessary to meet the objectives of this division. Consistent with this section, the proposed project will assist a local agency in developing to improve coastal access at the AMWS.

#### **CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S ACCESS PROGRAM STANDARDS:**

The Arcata Marsh and Wildlife Sanctuary Interpretive Signage project is consistent with Standard No. 12, Support Facilities, of the Conservancy's Standards and Recommendations for Accessway Location and Development in that the project involves design and installation of directional and interpretive signs throughout the AMWS. It is expected the new interpretive signs will directly replace the existing signs at their current locations, which seem to be adequate, and the directional signs with maps will be placed at key points and junctions in the trail system.

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

Consistent with **Goal 2, Objective E**, of the Conservancy's 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project entails constructing upgraded access facilities and enhances coastal recreational opportunities for residents and visitors.

Consistent with **Goal 3, Objective C**, of the Conservancy's 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project supports the design and implementation of high quality, site specific interpretive displays to educate the public of the AMWS and its coastal setting.

#### **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 has the support of the public including FOAM, Redwood Region Audubon Society, Humboldt County Supervisor Mark Lovelace, and State Assembly member Wes Chesbro (Exhibit 4).
4. **Location:** The proposed project would be located within the coastal zone of Arcata, Humboldt County.
5. **Need:** The signs at the marsh are outdated, inconsistent, and incomplete. The City has limited resources to replace the signage; Conservancy funding will provide the means necessary to update the marsh sign program.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** Arcata Marsh and Wildlife Sanctuary is renowned for harmonizing municipal needs with recreational uses such as bird watching, and attracts local and world-wide visitors to experience the rich natural resources of Humboldt Bay.
7. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** In 2009, the City completed a project to repair levee damage resulting from a 2005/06 storm event. The project resulted in raising the levee heights between 6 and 12 inches, to heights between 10 and 12ft (120 – 144 inches) above sea level. The bay front base and slopes of the freshwater pond levees were completely rekeyed, reinforced and refaced with rock to withstand storm surge damage. The City has not completed a study to determine the effects of sea level rise in the project area, but it has included funds in its capital improvement planning to add height to these levees over time. Given the existing heights of the levees and planned height increases, and considering the predicted sea level rise of 16 inches by the year 2050 and 55 inches by the year 2100, the signs at the AMWS should not be impacted by sea level rise for at least the next 100 years. However, in the event that sea level rise occurs faster than predicted, the signs are movable and the content would still be valuable at many locations throughout the Sanctuary.

#### **Additional Criteria**

10. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
14. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** The proposed project will continue the vision of providing public access at the marsh the Conservancy had when it granted funds to the City of Arcata to construct the marsh and develop the interpretive trail system for the AMWS.
16. **Cooperation:** The City will work closely with FOAM to design and install the signs.
18. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** The proposed project involves placement of signs using hand tools only and thus will not contribute to the generation of greenhouse gases.

#### **CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:**

The City’s General Plan, adopted by the City in 1987, and certified by the California Coastal Commission in 1988, and revised by the Arcata City Council on November 15, 1989, is the Local Coastal Plan (“LCP”) for the City. The proposed project is consistent with the following sections and policies of the LCP:

- Section II. Conservation Policy 7: Implementation Measure **\*\*T\*\***. The City shall seek funding to establish interpretive sites along the Arcata Bay shore including a Nature

Center and Wildlife Care Center to serve as an educational focal point for Arcata's natural resource areas.

- Section II. Conservation Policy 7: Implementation Measure \*\*U\*\*. The City shall seek funding to establish a system of foot trails and interpretive sites along the Arcata Bay shore.
- Parks and Recreation Element of the General Plan (updated on November 16, 1994 and included in the current local LCP), Goal IV – Policy A. The City of Arcata shall develop and improve parks and related facilities as funds become available; Section 1) Continue to seek grants from a variety of sources.
- Parks and Recreation Element of the General Plan, Goal V. Provide aesthetically pleasing parks and recreational facilities which are compatible with their environment.

The proposed project is consistent with the LCP in that the project includes expanding the AMWS's interpretive capacity, the project will be accomplished with funds from sources in addition to the City's funds, and the signs will be developed to blend with the natural setting of the AMWS.

The proposed project is consistent with the *City General Plan 2020*, adopted by the Arcata City Council on October 4, 2000 and amended on October 5, 2008. Though not yet certified by the Coastal Commission, the plan covers an array of development goals within the City's coastal zone, beyond those found in the LCP. The plan addresses use and maintenance of the AMWS and parks, specifically as follows:

- Policy PF-2b: The City shall maintain the existing facilities of the Arcata Marsh and Wildlife Sanctuary and construct new facilities consistent with the Marsh Enhancement Plan adopted by the City Council.
- Policy RC-4f: Management of bay front and marsh areas are for coastal access, recreation and tourism.
- Policy PR-5: Provide aesthetically pleasing parks and recreation facilities which are compatible with their environment.

The proposed project is consistent with the above. The signs are existing facilities in need of maintenance, the AMWS is a bay front area managed for recreation, and the new signs will be designed to be compatible with the marsh setting.

The *Arcata Parks and Recreation Master Plan*, adopted on October 20, 2010, lists the AMWS as a "High Maintenance Priority" for the City of Arcata. Chapter 5.C. of the plan discusses criteria for priority projects, including projects which sustain existing resources, increase trail connectivity, which enhance natural areas and support environmental education, and those that strengthen community identity and attract tourism. Further, the plan also discusses the importance of providing support facilities for trails within parks (Chapter 5.A.), and enhancing park aesthetics and identity by adding elements such as consistent park signage and communication kiosks/signs (Chapter 5.B.).

The proposed project is consistent with the foregoing in that the proposed project will sustain existing resource and support environmental education, and because it will provide consistent signage and communication (directional) signs at the AMWS.

**COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:**

The proposed design and installation of public access facilities including signage at the Arcata Marsh and Wildlife Sanctuary is categorically exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations section 15303 (New Construction or Conversion of Small Structures), which exempts “construction and location of limited numbers of new, small facilities, or structures...” and section 15311 (Accessory Structures), which exempts “construction or replacement of minor structures accessory to (appurtenant to) existing commercial, industrial, or institutional facilities”, including but not limited to on-premise signs.

Upon Conservancy approval of the project staff will file a Notice of Exemption for this project.