

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
October 18, 2012

PLEASANTON RIDGE REGIONAL PARK ACQUISITION III

Project No. 12-041-01
Project Manager: Betsy Wilson

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse \$750,000 to the East Bay Regional Park District for the acquisition of approximately 1,367 acres of property to expand the Pleasanton Ridge Regional Park in Alameda County.

LOCATION: Adjacent to Pleasanton Ridge Regional Park, Alameda County (Exhibit 1)

PROGRAM CATEGORY: San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy

EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location and Site Map](#)
 - Exhibit 2: [Map of Nearby Protected Lands](#)
 - Exhibit 3: [Project Photographs](#)
 - Exhibit 4: [Upland Habitat Goals Biodiversity Portfolio Report](#)
 - 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 31160-31165 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes disbursement of up to seven hundred fifty thousand dollars (\$750,000) to the East Bay Regional Park District (District) for the acquisition of approximately 1,367 acres of property commonly known as the “Robertson property”, Alameda County Assessor’s Parcel Numbers 085A-4700-002-35, 085A-4850-001, 085A-5000-002-03, and 096-0120-001-03, to expand the Pleasanton Ridge Regional Park, subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of any Conservancy funds for acquisition, the District shall submit for the review and approval of the Executive Officer all relevant acquisition documents, including but not limited to the appraisal, environmental assessments, escrow instructions, title reports, and documents of title necessary for the purchase of the property.

2. The District shall dedicate the property for natural resource protection, open space preservation and public access by an appropriate instrument approved by the Conservancy's Executive Officer.
3. The District shall pay no more than fair market value for the property, as established in an appraisal approved by the Conservancy's Executive Officer.
4. Prior to opening the site to the public, the District shall submit for the review and approval of the Conservancy's Executive Officer a plan showing the design and placement of sign(s) acknowledging 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 authorization is consistent with the purposes and objectives of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program, Chapter 4.5 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, Sections 31160-31165."

PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends authorization to disburse up to \$750,000 to the East Bay Regional Park District (District) toward the acquisition of approximately 1,367 acres of property commonly known as the "Robertson property", which is adjacent to the Pleasanton Ridge Regional Park in unincorporated Alameda County (Exhibit 1). Acquisition of the Robertson property would enable the District to expand the Pleasanton Ridge Regional Park, a 7,500-acre regional park running from Dublin to Sunol along the hills of southeastern San Francisco Bay. In addition, the project would aid in achieving important resource protection goals by maintaining open space, protecting endangered species habitat, extending wildlife corridors, and providing expanded recreational trail opportunities and wildlife viewing.

The potential for the District to purchase the Robertson property is a rare opportunity to acquire and protect an expansive, contiguous landscape with largely intact and diverse plant communities and wildlife. Together with 7,500 acres already protected in Pleasanton Ridge Regional Park, more than 6,000 acres at the District's nearby Garin, Dry Creek Pioneer, and Vargas Plateau Regional Parks, and the extensive holdings of the City and County of San Francisco, a regionally significant preserve is assembled in Niles Canyon around Alameda Creek, the East Bay's largest watershed (Exhibit 2). According to the San Francisco Bay Area Upland Habitat Goals Project Report, acquisition and protection of the Robertson property is essential to meeting regional conservation goals.

The Robertson property provides an important wildlife corridor between Walpert Ridge, Sunol Ridge, and Pleasanton Ridge. This connection allows for a number of animals with expansive ranges to use undisturbed habitats on the property. Additionally, the property will link to Pleasanton Ridge Regional Park's trails, providing opportunities for expansion of the recreational network for hiker, bikers, and equestrians.

Acquisition of the Robertson property would also preserve a diverse mosaic of habitat types. The property contains steep slopes with coastal scrub and chaparral as well as ridge top grasslands. In addition, the property features canyon riparian areas and oak and Bay Laurel woodlands. This mosaic provides habitats for numerous species including the special status Alameda whipsnake, California red-legged frog, and California tiger salamander.

The District successfully negotiated a purchase agreement with the Robertson property owners and seeks Conservancy assistance to complete the acquisition by the end of 2012. The District was founded in 1934 and manages over 112,000 acres in 65 parks. The District's mission to provide a diversified system of regional parks and trails while providing environmental stewardship of natural resources make it an appropriate grantee for San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program funds. The Conservancy has partnered with the District on numerous acquisition, restoration, and public access and recreation projects in Alameda and Contra Costa Counties.

Site Description: The Robertson property is vacant and consists of four assessor's parcels ranging in size from 319 to 367 acres, for a total of approximately 1,367 acres. Elevations are extremely varied across the property, ranging from 990 feet at roadside to 2,163 feet at the ridgeline. Gradients of 45% to 60% are common, with scattered level plateaus throughout. The northeast portions of the property include the upper elevations of Sunol Ridge, which is a major geologic formation in the region. Views are exceptional and panoramic from numerous vantage points. Photographs of property are included as Exhibit 3.

A series of undulating hills and gullies contain seasonal creeks which drain to Palomares Creek, a major tributary of Alameda Creek. Plant communities on the site include oak woodland, chaparral, coastal scrub, and grassland. The property also contains numerous stock ponds and ephemeral and intermittent drainages.

The property contains important habitat for a number of threatened or endangered species, including the California tiger salamander, California red-legged frog, and Alameda whipsnake. Numerous raptors such as the golden eagle and prairie falcon are dependent on prey which forages in the riparian areas. The connectivity to adjacent preserved open spaces makes this property an important wildlife corridor between Walpert Ridge, Sunol Ridge, and Pleasanton Ridge. The substantial size of the property makes it especially valuable to mountain lion, a specially protected species.

The Upland Habitat Goals Biodiversity Portfolio Report for the property (Exhibit 4) ranks the property as highly suitable for conservation and notes the property's contribution towards protection goals for semi-desert/desert scrub, California bay forest, coastal scrub, coast live oak forest/woodland, warm and moderate grasslands, and ponds. Approximately 78% of the property is designated as essential (42%) or important (36%) for completing the conservation lands network in the Bay Area.

Project History: The District has been actively acquiring property along Pleasanton Ridge since the 1980s as part of its long-term plan to create a park along the undeveloped East Bay ridge tops. In 2005, the Conservancy provided \$400,000 to the District for the acquisition of the 106-acre Vinson property which was on the northern end of Pleasanton Ridge Regional Park. In 2011, the Conservancy provided \$1,000,000 to the District to assist with the acquisition of the 955-acre Owen property, located to the north of the Robertson property along the Sunol Ridge.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$ 750,000
East Bay Regional Park District	3,085,425
Alameda County (pending)	1,000,000
Gordon and Betty Moore Foundation (pending)	1,000,000
Private mitigation funds (pending)	<u>400,000</u>
Total Project Costs	\$6,235,425

The anticipated source of Conservancy funds will be an appropriation to the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program of the “Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006” (Proposition 84). This funding source may be used for the protection and restoration of the natural habitat values of coastal waters and lands, pursuant to the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code. The proposed project serves to preserve the natural habitat values of lands in the Alameda Creek watershed which drains into San Francisco Bay. In addition, as discussed below, the project is consistent with Chapter 4.5 of Division 21.

Proposition 84 also requires that, for acquisition projects that protect natural resources, the Conservancy assess whether the project meets at least one of the criteria specified in Section 75071 of the Public Resources Code. The proposed acquisition satisfies three of the five specified criteria:

- 1) The property contributes to linking existing protected areas with other large blocks of protected habitat. The linkage serves to connect existing protected areas, facilitate wildlife movement and botanical transfer, and results in sustainable combined acreage within the Pleasanton Ridge of the undeveloped ridgetops of south eastern San Francisco Bay.
- 2) The project will contribute to long-term protection of and improvement to the water and biological quality of Palomares Creek within the Alameda Creek watershed.
- 3) The project is supported by matching funds. An additional \$5,485,425, or approximately 88% of the total project cost, is being contributed to the acquisition from funding sources other than the Conservancy. The proposed funding includes mitigation funds being paid by a private developer to mitigate the adverse impacts of a proposed residential development in Alameda County.

As required by Section 75701, Conservancy staff has submitted to the Resources Agency and posted on the Conservancy’s website an explanation as to how the proposed acquisition meets the criteria of this section.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

This project is undertaken pursuant to Chapter 4.5 of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Public Resources Code Sections 31160-31165, to address resource goals in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Consistent with Section 31162, the project is located in the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area.

Under Section 31162(a), the Conservancy may award grants that will “improve public access to, within, and around the bay, coast, ridgetops, and urban open spaces...through completion...of regional bay, coast, water and ridge trail systems...” The proposed addition of the Robertson property to Pleasanton Ridge Regional Park will provide a link in the future Sunol Ridge Trail and expand access in the western side of the park.

Under Section 31162(b), the Conservancy may act to “protect, restore, and enhance natural habitats and connecting corridors, watersheds, scenic areas and other open-space resources of regional importance.” Acquisition of the Robertson property will bring its natural resources under the stewardship of the District. The natural resources on the property include riparian wetlands and creeks, oak/bay woodlands, mixed chaparral, grasslands, seeps, springs, and habitat for several special-status species.

Furthermore, under Section 31162(d), the Conservancy may “promote, assist, and enhance projects that provide open space and natural areas that are accessible to urban populations for recreational and educational purposes.” This property is only a few minutes’ drive from Interstate 580 and easily accessed by residents of Alameda and Contra Costa counties.

The proposed project also satisfies each of the five criteria for determining project priority under Section 31163(c) in the following respects: (1) the acquisition is consistent with the District’s 2007 Master Plan, the open space elements of the Alameda County General Plan, and *The Conservation Lands Network: San Francisco Bay Area Upland Habitat Goals Project Report*; (2) it will serve a regional constituency as part of the District’s park system, which attracts visitors from the entire Bay Area; (3) the District and the seller are ready to complete the transaction by the end of 2012; (4) not purchasing this property could result in development of the property and the loss of a significant conservation and public recreational opportunity; and (5) the proposal includes matching funds from other sources as described under the “Project Financing” section above.

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

Consistent with **Goal 10, Objective D** of the Conservancy’s 2007 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will protect 1,367 acres of uplands wildlife habitat, connection corridors, and scenic areas of regional significance in one of the Bay Area’s nine counties.

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 November 10, 2011, 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 is supported by Congressman Pete Stark, State Assemblyman Bob Wieckowski, East Bay Area Trails Council, East Bay Chapter of the Sierra Club, California Native Plant Society, and the Sunol Citizens Advisory Committee. Project letters are included as Exhibit 5.
4. **Location:** The Robertson property is located in Alameda County and is within the jurisdiction of the San Francisco Bay Area Conservancy Program. This acquisition is contiguous with the Pleasanton Ridge Regional Park and would provide additional protection of natural resources and public access to the park.
5. **Need:** The District will use their own funds (Measure WW bond funding) for almost half of the acquisition cost, but additional funding is needed to complete the acquisition. The District is assembling additional funding from multiple sources including the requested Conservancy funds.
6. **Greater-than-local interest:** The District's regional parks serve a regional constituency and draw visitors from all over the Bay Area. In addition, the project is a short distance from Interstate 580 and easily accessible. The property contains important habitats, and a portion of the property is identified by the Upland Habitat Goals project as essential for the Conservation Lands Network.
7. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The lowest elevation of the property is 990 feet; the property will not be vulnerable to sea level rise.

Additional Criteria

8. **Urgency:** The purchase agreement requires the District to complete escrow by the end of December 2012.
9. **Leverage:** See the "Project Financing" section above.
10. **Readiness:** The District has all of the project elements in place to enable closing escrow by the end of December 2012, in accordance with the terms of the purchase and sale agreement.
11. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** See "Project History" above.
12. **Vulnerability from climate change impacts other than sea level rise:** Preserving the property for public park purposes will help minimize adverse climate change impacts. In an undeveloped condition the natural landscape will be more resilient to climate change; for example, there will be fewer constraints to the migration of plant and animal species. In addition, the property features great topographical variation and is likely to preserve a variety of habitat types even in the face of climate change. Due to both its large size and proximity to other protected lands, the Robertson property facilitates wildlife movement and botanical transfer, and results in sustainable combined acreage within the Pleasanton Ridge area.
13. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** The proposed acquisition project will not result in the production of greenhouse gas emissions. Because the property is near its current holdings at Pleasanton Ridge Regional Park, District staff will not have to make additional vehicle trips to manage and maintain the property.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

As a transfer of ownership of interest in land to preserve open space and habitat, including acquisition for the preservation and restoration of natural conditions, the proposed project is categorically exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) under 14 Cal. Code of Regulations Section 15325. The project is also exempt under Section 15313, which provides a categorical exemption for the acquisition of lands for fish and wildlife conservation, including preservation for public access, where the purpose of the acquisition is to preserve the land in its natural condition. Upon approval, staff will file a Notice of Exemption for this project.