

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation
February 2, 2017

RAMONA GARDENS NATURAL PARK

Project No. 16-052-01
Project Manager: Sam Jenniches

RECOMMENDED ACTION: Authorization to disburse up to \$510,000 to Community Conservation Solutions to plan and design a multi-benefit green infrastructure park at the Ramona Gardens Housing Development in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of the city of Los Angeles, Los Angeles County

LOCATION: Boyle Heights neighborhood, city of Los Angeles, Los Angeles County

PROGRAM CATEGORY: Integrated Coastal and Marine Resource Protection

EXHIBITS

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

Exhibit 2: [Project Letters](#)

RESOLUTION AND FINDINGS:

Staff recommends that the State Coastal Conservancy adopt the following resolution pursuant to Sections 31113 and 31220 of the Public Resources Code:

“The State Coastal Conservancy hereby authorizes the disbursement of up to five hundred ten thousand dollars (\$510,000) to Community Conservation Solutions (“the grantee”) to plan and design a multiple benefit green infrastructure park at the Ramona Gardens Housing Development in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of the city of Los Angeles, subject to the following conditions:

1. Prior to the disbursement of funds, the grantee shall submit for the review and written approval of the Conservancy’s Executive Officer a work program, including budget and schedule, and any contractors to be retained for project work, and documentation that all funds needed to complete the project have been secured.
2. The grantee shall ensure that the plan and design of project access facilities is consistent with all applicable federal or state laws governing access for persons with disabilities.”

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 authorization is consistent with Chapter 3 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code regarding addressing impacts of climate change (Section 31113) and Chapter 5.5 regarding reducing contamination of waters within the coastal zone (Section 31220).
 2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
 3. Community Conservation Solutions is a nonprofit corporation recognized as a 501(c)(3) organization under the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.”
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PROJECT SUMMARY:

Staff recommends that the Conservancy authorize disbursement of an amount not to exceed five hundred ten thousand dollars (\$510,000) to Community Conservation Solutions (CCS) to plan and design a multi-benefit green infrastructure park (the Natural Park) at the Ramona Gardens Housing Development in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of the city of Los Angeles, Los Angeles County.

The Natural Park at Ramona Gardens Housing Development will meet multiple needs: creation of a publicly-accessible natural habitat in the park-poor, densely-populated Ramona Gardens housing project; permanent native tree and vegetation buffers for the high levels of noise and air pollution from the adjacent freeway and transit corridor; green open space and walking paths to help address multiple health problems; natural places for children to play and adults to walk; shade trees; and green street walkways that connect residents of Ramona Gardens and Boyle Heights to schools, Hazard Park and other public services.

CCS will conduct the investigations, planning, site studies, mapping, evaluation of opportunities and constraints, and coordination with public agencies and the surrounding community in order to prepare a site concept plan for the Natural Park on the 3.87 acres between the housing project and the adjacent transit corridor which will establish native habitat, walking trails, seating, and a sound wall. CCS will also create a plan to provide pedestrian connections between Ramona Gardens and the surrounding Boyle Heights neighborhood, including nearby schools, Hazard Park, the Wellness Center, LA County/USC General Hospital, the planned L.A. River Trail and other community services.

The proposed project will create a native habitat “Nature in the City” model at Ramona Gardens that can be replicated on many of the other 19 public housing projects of the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles, which serve severely-disadvantaged communities. It will demonstrate how strategic use of restored natural habitats can reduce air and noise pollution impacts that affect disadvantaged communities, and transform a barren, neglected area into a beautiful, natural green open space. Such green spaces improve residents’ quality of life and address chronic public health problems that disproportionately affect residents of Ramona Gardens and Boyle Heights. The plan will include native plant communities in an ecosystem design that will filter water draining to nearby waterways, including the L.A. River, and provide a link to habitat in nearby planned and emerging habitat restoration efforts, including Ascot Hills

and the L.A. River, providing vital habitat for native birds, butterflies, insects and other wildlife. Cumulatively, the components of a park at this site will result in carbon sequestration and urban heat island effect mitigation as adaptation to climate change.

The project work will involve identifying technical site issues, community and public agency needs, and permitting requirements so that the project can proceed to full design, permitting and construction.

CCS's mission is to tackle the most complex and challenging problems created when people and nature intersect by developing creative, practical and lasting solutions that unite diverse communities and interests and leverage investments of public funds. CCS has successfully crafted innovative solutions to serious environmental problems affecting California's natural and human communities by integrating the protection and restoration of natural lands and waters with compatible community uses, economic benefits and permanent public benefits.

Site Description: The Ramona Gardens Natural Park project site is located on 3.87 acres of primarily vacant land within the Ramona Gardens Housing Project, owned and managed by the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles, in the Boyle Heights neighborhood of Los Angeles. The site is located between the residential buildings and a massive transit corridor comprised of the 12-lane CA 10 Interstate Freeway, the El Monte Busway/ HOV Lane and a Metrolink train line. A short cinderblock wall and a few sparse trees separate the transit corridor from residences at Ramona Gardens. The site is primarily paved and includes the shell of an old concrete structure; degraded and unused handball and tennis courts; an old basketball court; a small playground; mobile units used as offices, gang intervention services; a library; a storm drain and drainage grates; and a small community garden. The site connects to a pedestrian bridge that provides access across the I-10 freeway and transit corridor. The Ramona Gardens housing project is located within Boyle Heights, and is bounded by the freeway and transit corridor described above, residential streets and industrial land uses.

The Boyle Heights neighborhood in which Ramona Gardens is located includes tightly-packed residences; steep, narrow streets with cracked, poorly-maintained sidewalks and barren parkways with minimal shade trees or vegetation; and a degraded, sub-standard alley connecting to Ramona Gardens that is used daily by children and adults as a walkway to schools and community services, and which also serves as driveway access and conveyance for stormwater runoff. In addition to the I-10 freeway and transit corridor, this neighborhood is surrounded by numerous industrial land uses and trucking facilities, heavily-travelled boulevards with fast-moving traffic and poor visibility, L.A. County Central Juvenile Hall, and numerous medical facilities, including the LA County/USC General Hospital, The Wellness Center and the USC Health Sciences Campus. Nearby Hazard Park (owned and operated by L.A. City Department of Recreation and Parks), lies between the neighborhood and these health facilities, and is used as an ad hoc walking connection by residents. No walking trail system exists to provide these community linkages.

Project History: The project site at the Ramona Gardens Housing Development was identified as a high priority as a result of the analysis conducted by Community Conservation Solutions' Green Solution Project for the Upper L.A. River Watershed, Phase IV (GSP4), funded in part by the State Coastal Conservancy. The Green Solution Project's analysis evaluated and prioritized for implementation nearly 500 parks, schools, colleges and vacant parcels in the Upper L.A. River watershed. Out of these 500 parcels, the Ramona Gardens site was ranked as a priority

location for a multiple-benefit project because it can provide the following benefits: new natural habitat, parks and open space in a disadvantaged, park-poor community with great needs; and linkages to other nearby habitat, trails and/or natural areas.

Many public improvements have been initiated for Boyle Heights, due to the high levels of poverty, unemployment and impacts from surrounding land uses. This Natural Park and Green Walking Connections project focuses on this particular part of Boyle Heights because it is one of the most under-served in this community. Residents here suffer the most from the impacts of the adjacent 12-lane freeway, busway, Metrolink train line and industrial uses, and this area has not yet seen the same level of benefits from the range of public improvements being put in place elsewhere in surrounding neighborhoods.

Legacy LA, a local community-based organization focused on youth development in Ramona Gardens and surrounding neighborhoods, and the Legacy LA Youth Council have called for environmental improvements in this area. In 2014, Legacy LA concluded a year-long research project, in which youth from Ramona Gardens focused on the environmental justice issues they found, with a specific focus on the problem of air pollution as a result of the multiple nearby freeways and the resulting health impacts. The Youth Council noted the high amount of particulate matter in the air compared to other communities of Los Angeles. The Youth Council also called attention to the fact that the Ramona Gardens Housing Development is very isolated geographically from the rest of Boyle Heights, and that residents must walk up and down steep, degraded and accident-prone alleyways. Their conclusions included a call for greening these walkways and using pervious pavement.

PROJECT FINANCING

Coastal Conservancy	\$510,000
Other Funders	\$125,580
Project Total	\$635,580

The expected source of funding for this authorization is the fiscal year 2016/17 appropriation to the Conservancy from the “Water Quality, Supply, and Infrastructure Improvement Act of 2014” (Proposition 1, Division 26.7 of the Water Code, § 79700 et seq.). Funds appropriated to the Conservancy derive from Chapter 6 (commencing with Section 79730) and may be used “for multi-benefit water quality, water supply, and watershed protection and restoration projects for the watersheds of the state” (Section 79731). Section 79732(a) identifies the specific purposes of Chapter 6, of which the following pertain to this project: implement watershed adaptation projects in order to reduce the impacts of climate change on California’s communities and ecosystems (subsection (a)(2)); protect and restore coastal watersheds (subsection (a)(10)); and reduce pollution or contamination of rivers and streams, and protect or restore natural system functions that contribute to water supply, water quality, or flood management (subsection (a)(11)).

The proposed project was selected through the fourth-round competitive grant process under the Conservancy’s *Proposition 1 Grant Program Guidelines* adopted in June 2015 (see § 79706(a)). The proposed project meets each of the evaluation criteria in the Proposition 1 Guidelines as

described in further detail in this “Project Financing” section, the “Project Summary” section and in the “Consistency with Conservancy’s Project Selection Criteria & Guidelines” section of this report.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S ENABLING LEGISLATION:

The proposed project would be undertaken pursuant to Section 31113 of Chapter 3 of the of the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding impacts of climate change, and pursuant to Chapter 5.5 of Division 21 (Section 31220), regarding coastal and marine resource protection.

Section 31113 authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to public agencies and nonprofit organizations for projects to address the potential impacts of climate change. Pursuant to this authorization, the Conservancy may provide grants for projects that reduce greenhouse gas emissions. Consistent with this section, the proposed project would assist in “reducing greenhouse gas emissions” by planning an urban greening project.

Section 31220(a) permits the Conservancy to provide grants for coastal watershed and coastal water quality, sediment management, and resources protection projects, provided that such projects meet one or more of the objectives detailed in 31220(b). Subsections (1) and (7) of Section 31220(b) specifically authorize projects that reduce contamination of waters within the coastal zone and that reduce the impact of population and economic pressures on coastal and marine resources. By preparing the pre-implementation plans and designs necessary to install green infrastructure in the upper L.A. River watershed, the proposed project will help improve water quality of coastal waters and reduce the impacts of dense population along the Los Angeles coast.

As also required by Section 31220(a), Conservancy staff has consulted with the State Water Resources Control Board in the development of the project or grant to ensure consistency with Chapter 3 (commencing with Section 30915) of Division 20.4 of the Public Resources Code. In addition, consistent with Section 31220(c) the plan produced under the proposed project will include a monitoring and evaluation component and is consistent with regional, local or State watershed management and water quality plans or programs, as described in the “Consistency with Local Watershed Management Plan/State Water Quality Control Plan” section, below.

CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY’S 2013 STRATEGIC PLAN GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S), AS REVISED JUNE 25, 2015:

Consistent with **Goal 5, Objective F** of the Conservancy’s 2013-2018 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will complete a plan to improve water quality to benefit coastal and ocean resources.

Consistent with **Goal 7, Objective C** of the Conservancy’s 2013-2018 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will develop a site specific adaptation plan to address predicted climate change impacts.

Consistent with **Goal 9, Objective B** of the Conservancy’s 2013-2018 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will support the installation of interpretive and educational displays related to coastal, watershed and climate change education.

**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 October 2, 2014, 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. **Promotion and implementation of state plans and policies:**
 - a. *California @ 50 Million: The Environmental Goals and Policy Report* (Governor's Office of Planning and Research, 2013 Draft). The proposed project will promote the following goals: *Steward and Protect Natural and Working Landscapes - 6. Build resilience into natural systems and prioritize natural and green infrastructure solutions*, and *Incorporate Climate Adaptation into all Planning and Investment - 2. Prioritize GHG emission reduction actions that provide climate resilience benefits, especially in the natural resource sector*. The proposed project will build resilience by restoring native habitat utilizing natural and green infrastructure solutions, and prioritize GHG emission reduction and climate resilience by investing in urban forestry.
 - b. *CA Climate Adaptation Strategy: Safeguarding California* (California Department of Fish and Wildlife, 2010). The proposed project will promote the goals and will serve to implement priority actions of this Strategy under the heading "Biodiversity and Habitat; Energy; Public Health and Water", since it will assist in: improving habitat connectivity; supporting environmental stewardship across sectors by promoting nature-based solutions for adapting to climate risks; create and maintain partnerships that support biodiversity conservation and promote public education and outreach; promote measures that reduce energy demand through support of urban greening and energy-conserving land use practices; support active transportation measures through development of pedestrian and bicycle infrastructure and non-infrastructure programs and approaches; prepare California for hotter and dryer conditions and protect and restore water resources for important ecosystems.
4. **Support of the public:** The project is supported by Senate President pro Tem Kevin De León, Assemblymember Jimmy Gomez, the Housing Authority of the City of Los Angeles, the Ramona Gardens Resident Advisory Council, Alma Family Services, the Boys and Girls Club of West San Gabriel Valley, the East Los Angeles Community Corporation, Legacy L.A., Murchison Street Elementary School, North East Trees, the Wellness Center and the USC Keck School of Medicine
5. **Location:** The project is located within the Boyle Heights neighborhood of the city of Los Angeles and has components that will improve water quality in the Los Angeles River system.

6. **Need:** Conservancy funding is critical for this first phase of planning and design to position the project to be eligible to apply for other grants in 2017. Without this initial funding the project will be delayed indefinitely.
7. **Greater-than-local interest:** The Ramona Gardens Natural Park will be a distinctly local project that provides great benefit for those living nearby. However, it is effectively a pilot project that can be replicated in highly urban areas throughout the region and state.
8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** The project is not vulnerable to sea level rise.

Additional Criteria

9. **Resolution of more than one issue:** The project will reduce the urban heat island effect, create habitat, improve water quality and provide walking trails in an underserved community in Los Angeles.
10. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
11. **Readiness:** The grantee is ready to immediately undertake the project.
12. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** “See “Project History” above.”
13. **Return to Conservancy:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
14. **Cooperation:** The project involves significant local collaboration and wide-ranging support.
15. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** While this is a planning project, when implemented it will involve components designed to sequester carbon.

CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL WATERSHED MANAGEMENT PLAN/ STATE WATER QUALITY CONTROL PLAN:

The Integrated Regional Water Management Upper Los Angeles River Sub-regional Plan (IRWMP) applies to the specific project area of the Ramona Gardens Natural Park and Boyle Heights Green Walking Connections Project. The project meets three of the five objectives of the IRWMP: 1) improving water quality; 2) enhancing habitat; and 3) enhancing open space and recreation. The project also benefits a fourth objective, improving water supply, through the utilization of native and drought tolerant plant materials. The proposed project will promote the goals of the IRWMP by assisting in creating a more efficient use of stormwater, protecting and improving water quality, and promoting environmental stewardship.

COMPLIANCE WITH CEQA:

The proposed project is statutorily exempt from review under the California Environmental Quality Act pursuant to 14 California Code of Regulations Section 15262, in that it involves only planning studies and feasibility analyses for possible future actions which have not yet been approved, adopted, or funded. As required by section 15262, the proposed planning project will consider environmental factors. Upon approval staff will file a Notice of Exemption for this project.