

COASTAL CONSERVANCY

Staff Recommendation  
October 17, 2019

**Little River Coastal Trail Design**

Project No. 12-042-03  
Project Manager: Peter Jaraus

**RECOMMENDED ACTION:** Authorization to disburse up to \$900,000 to the Redwood Community Action Agency for planning, design, and environmental review needed to enable development of the Little River Trail, a section of the California Coastal Trail from Little River State Beach to Scenic Drive, in Humboldt County.

**LOCATION:** Humboldt County

**PROGRAM CATEGORY:** Public Access

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EXHIBITS

- Exhibit 1: [Project Location](#)  
Exhibit 2: [Project Photos](#)  
Exhibit 3: [Project Letters](#)
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**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 nine hundred thousand dollars (\$900,000) to the Redwood Community Action Agency (“the grantee”) to conduct planning and prepare designs and environmental review documentation needed to facilitate development of the Little River Trail, a section of the California Coastal Trail, from Little River State Beach to Scenic Drive, in Humboldt County.

Prior to commencement of the project, the grantee shall submit for the review and written approval of the Executive Officer of the Conservancy (Executive Officer) the following:

1. A detailed work program, schedule, and budget.
  2. Names and qualifications of any contractors to be retained in carrying out the project.
  3. A plan for acknowledgement of Conservancy funding.
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4. In addition, to the extent appropriate, the grantee shall incorporate the guidelines of the Conservancy's 'Standards and Recommendations for Accessway Location and Development' and the requirements of all applicable federal and state laws governing barrier-free access for persons with disabilities into the Little River Trail."

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 9 of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code, regarding the creation of a system of public accessways.
2. The proposed project is consistent with the current Conservancy Project Selection Criteria and Guidelines.
3. The Redwood Community Action Agency is a nonprofit organization organized under section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, and whose purposes are consistent with Division 21 of the Public Resources Code."

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#### **PROJECT SUMMARY:**

Staff recommends the Conservancy authorize a disbursement of up to \$900,000 to the Redwood Community Action Agency (RCAA) to conduct planning and prepare designs and environmental review documentation for the Little River Trail, a proposed new, approximately 1-mile section of California Coastal Trail (CCT) in Humboldt County. Closing this gap in the CCT was identified as a priority project by the Conservancy-funded Humboldt County Coastal Trail Implementation Study, a county-wide assessment of the CCT route completed in January of 2011 by RCAA. This CCT gap lies within and between the heavily used public beaches of Clam Beach/Little River State Beach to the south and Moonstone Beach to the north (see Exhibits 1 and 2). This CCT section is along a one mile stretch of the coast that includes dunes, riparian forest, uplands, off shore rocks, a stretch of the Little River, and the mouth of the Little River. To cross the Little River, bicyclists and pedestrians must use the Highway 101 Bridge, which is a 4-lane highway with no specific accommodations for pedestrians or bicyclists. The only other alternative is to ford the Little River which can only be done on a limited basis during the dry season.

RCAA prepared a feasibility study of the route in 2013, which identified potential alignments of the trail, and generated support for the trail from the California Department of Parks and Recreation (CDPR), California Department of Transportation (Caltrans), and the Trinidad Coastal Land Trust (TCLT). RCAA also identified a property on the north end that was needed for a trailhead, which was subsequently purchased by the TCLT with Conservancy assistance.

Caltrans's partnership has been critical to moving the project forward because it appears that the trail will likely need to be located within the Caltrans right of way, and that the Highway 101 bridge will need to be expanded. The Highway 101 Bridge over the Little River does not currently have sufficient room to safely accommodate pedestrians and bicyclists. With Caltrans's permission, the feasibility study examined three options for crossing the Little River: a stand-alone structure, a structure that cantilevers off the existing bridge, and widening the existing bridge. A consulting bridge engineer provided cost estimates and examined the feasibility of all three options. The least-cost option is to widen the existing structure to the west to accommodate a completely separate pathway for bicyclists and pedestrians. The existing bridge was not constructed in such a way as to allow for cantilevering, which would have reduced the cost and environmental footprint. Because a widened bridge would still be owned and operated by Caltrans this project must meet their bridge engineering standards.

Additional CEQA studies and consultation with regulatory agencies will be required because of the bridge widening. The widening itself requires the construction of foundation and pilings in the Little River with the potential to impact federally listed fish species. A hydroacoustic analysis will be prepared to look at the potential impact of the construction activities themselves. There will be additional consultation with the California Department of Fish and Wildlife and the National Marine Fisheries Service to examine the long-term impacts of widening the bridge.

For the trail itself, the CEQA analysis will include both geotechnical investigation as well as comprehensive environmental analysis. The studies will be somewhat broader than usual so that the project can meet the standards for both CEQA and NEPA to facilitate future grant applications to both State and Federal grant programs. The studies will include a wetland delineation, rare plant survey, biological analysis for state and federally listed species, and a cultural resources evaluation. Once these studies have been completed, they will guide the final trail alignment, which will avoid and mitigate project impacts.

The proposed authorization would provide the funds necessary for RCAA to work with the Caltrans and CDPR to move the project forward. Specifically, RCAA will:

1. Prepare 30% design plans, specifications, and estimates of the trail and widening of the Caltrans bridge.
2. Conduct studies necessary for the environmental review.
3. Prepare a draft environmental document (CEQA & NEPA) for adoption by Caltrans and CDPR.
4. Prepare a Caltrans Project Report, an internal Caltrans document which contains all of the engineering studies for this phase of the project. This includes the broader geotechnical work as well as a site analysis for the in-stream work.

RCAA will enter into an agreement with Caltrans so that Caltrans can provide technical review of the deliverables and function as the lead agency for CEQA. Given that much of the proposed trail is likely to be within the Caltrans right of way, and involves the Highway 101 Bridge,

Caltrans has agreed to lead the trail construction effort, provided that future funding can be secured.

**Site Description:** The project site is a one-mile stretch of coast that includes the northern portion of Little River State Beach/Clam Beach, the mouth of the Little River, and the southern portion of Moonstone beach. There are segments of CCT to the north and south of the project site. Both beaches are popular coastal access points. Clam Beach County Park and Little River State Beach offer opportunities for hiking and horseback riding and have an extensive dune system. Clam Beach also offers seasonal vehicular access to the beach and camping, and is connected to the communities of McKinleyville and Arcata by the Hammond Coastal Trail, an existing section of the California Coastal Trail. CDPR has completed a section of the CCT through the dunes at Little River State Beach to the southern bank of the Little River, but that section is not a multi-purpose trail; the proposed Little River Trail would be parallel to the CDPR trail for a short distance, but would extend much farther and would accommodate more users, including bicyclists.

Moonstone Beach County Park is a highly popular day use area for dog walkers, hikers, and surfers who enjoy the dramatic near shore rocks and flat sandy beach. Access to Moonstone Beach from the City of Trinidad is along a low traffic Road with stunning views of the coastline and seastacks of the California Coastal National Monument.

The project site includes a stretch of the Little River and the mouth of the Little River. To cross the Little River, bicyclists and pedestrians must use the Highway 101 Bridge which is a 4 lane, highway, with no specific accommodations for pedestrians or bicyclists. The only other alternative is to ford the Little River which can only be done on a limited basis during the dry season. The area is constrained by steep topography on the east side of the highway and wetlands to the west. There is no other public road that crosses the Little River.

The proposed trail alignments all cross property owned by TCLT, Caltrans, and CDPR. During the feasibility study Caltrans expressed its support for widening the Highway 101 bridge to accommodate a trail.

**Grantee Qualifications:** RCAA, a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization based in Humboldt County, is ideally suited to spearhead this project. Since 1982, the Natural Resources Division of RCAA has planned, designed and constructed public access trails and resource enhancement projects, developed interpretive and educational programs, and completed region-wide conservation and access studies. The RCAA is highly respected in Humboldt County and has worked extensively with the Conservancy, Humboldt County, local jurisdictions, state and federal entities and local stakeholders.

**Project History:** The Little River Coastal Trail was identified as a priority project by previous planning efforts including the 2011 Humboldt County Coastal Trail Implementation Strategy (“HCCTIS”) funded by the Conservancy. The HCCTIS, a collaboration between RCAA and local governments, recommended CCT alignments throughout Humboldt County, prioritized recommended trail segments, and provided assistance to local jurisdictions and organizations

planning the CCT. The 2001 Hammond Coastal Trail Extension Analysis: From Trinidad to Fortuna (funded by the Conservancy and written by RCAA with input from local governments) also identified the need for a crossing, as did public comment for the Humboldt County Regional Trails Master Plan conducted by the Humboldt County Association of Governments in 2011.

In October of 2012 the Conservancy authorized a grant to RCAA for the Little River Coastal Trail Conceptual Plans. RCAA worked in partnership with the landowners and the public to identify a multi-purpose trail alignment and a preferred non-motorized crossing option of the Little River. They also produced a feasibility study with cost estimates for construction and options for long term maintenance. The proposed authorization will further those efforts by developing 30% designs and environmental analysis for the trail improvements.

**PROJECT FINANCING**

<b>Coastal Conservancy</b>	<b>\$900,000</b>
<b>Project Total</b>	<b>\$900,000</b>

The proposed source of Conservancy funds for this authorization is an appropriation to the Conservancy from Proposition 84, i.e., the “Safe Drinking Water, Water Quality and Supply, Flood Control, River and Coastal Protection Bond Act of 2006,” Public Resources Code § 75001 et seq. These funds are available for Conservancy projects that promote access to and enjoyment of coastal resources and that are consistent with the Conservancy’s enabling legislation at Division 21 of the Public Resources Code.

The project will promote access to and enjoyment of the coast by facilitating development of a new section of Coastal Trail. It is consistent with the Conservancy’s enabling legislation, as discussed in the “Consistency with Conservancy’s enabling legislation” section of this report, below. The proposed authorization is thus consistent with Proposition 84.

In addition, Caltrans estimates that it will provide \$150,000 of staff time as oversight for the project.

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

The proposed project would be undertaken pursuant to Chapter 9 (Sections 31400 et seq.) of Division 21 of the Public Resources Code. Section 31400 states the Legislature’s intent that the Conservancy have a principal role in the implementation of a system of public accessways to and along the state’s coastline. Section 31400.1 authorizes the Conservancy to award grants to public agencies and nonprofit organizations to develop lands for public access to and along the coast. Section 31400.3 allows the Conservancy to provide such assistance as is required to aid nonprofit organizations in establishing a system of public coastal accessways and related functions necessary to meet the objectives of Division 21. RCAA, which will carry out the

proposed project, is a private non-profit organization existing under Section 501(c)(3) of the U.S. Internal Revenue Code, having among its principal charitable purposes the conservation of land for scientific, educational, scenic, or open space opportunities. The proposed project is necessary to facilitate development of a new section of the CCT along the coast in Humboldt County. RCAA is unable to carry out the project without Conservancy funding. Accordingly, Conservancy funding of the proposed project is consistent with sections 31400, 31400.1, and 31400.3.

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

As a condition of receiving grant funds, the grantee must design the Little River Trail consistent, to the extent feasible, with the Coastal Conservancy's "Standards and Recommendations for Accessway Location and Development." These include:

**Standard No. 1, Protect Public and Coastal Resources:** The trail will be designed to prevent visitors from accessing sensitive areas, while still providing access to the coast. And the trail will be designed to minimize alteration of natural landforms and be subordinate to the setting's character.

**Standard No. 4, Privacy:** The trail will be located well away from private property.

**Standard No. 8, Trails:** The trail will provide access along the coast and access to scenic vistas.

**CONSISTENCY WITH CONSERVANCY'S [2018-2022 STRATEGIC PLAN](#)  
GOAL(S) & OBJECTIVE(S):**

Consistent with **Goal 1, Objective C** of the Conservancy's 2018-2022 Strategic Plan, the proposed project will design a new segment of the Coastal 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 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:** The proposed project meets the goals for Completing the California Coastal Trail (2003) as it plans for a section of the CCT.

The proposed project will help Caltrans meet its statewide Complete Streets Policy (Deputy Directive 64-R2) which states that Caltrans "... provides for the needs of travelers of all ages and abilities in all planning, programming, design, construction, operations, and maintenance activities and products on the State Highway System."

4. **Support of the public:** see "Project Letters"
5. **Location:** The proposed project is located within the coastal zone of Humboldt County.
6. **Need:** Conservancy funding is needed to do the design and permitting work so that the project will be more competitive for federal funding. Without funding from the Conservancy, the proposed project will not be implemented, or will be delayed by several years.
7. **Greater-than-local interest:** The proposed project will design a new section of the CCT, a statewide objective. The proposed trail, when constructed, will benefit not only pedestrians but also cyclists traveling down the Pacific Coast Bicycle Route by providing a safer alternative to riding on the highway.
8. **Sea level rise vulnerability:** Portions of the project area will be impacted by sea level rise, particularly during winter storm events combined with a high tide. However, sufficient area exists at about 14' in elevation on both sides of the Little River that any proposed bridge footings should be able to be constructed outside of the area impacted by even the 43 to 69-inch sea level rise predicted for the year 2100.

The trail will also be designed to meet the Caltrans sea level rise standards found in The California Department of Transportation Guidance on Incorporating Sea Level Rise: For the use in the planning and development of Project Initiation Documents (May 2011).

The project area is within a Tsunami Hazard Zone on maps provided by the California Emergency Management Agency and based on modeling which done by the University of Southern California. For more populated areas in Humboldt County the Redwood Coast Tsunami Work Group developed detailed maps based on paleohistoric seismic and historic data on northern coast of California, and historic records in Japan. The range of run-up on the open coast used by the Redwood Coast Tsunami Working Group was predicted to be between 3 and 35 meters depending on the event causing the tsunami. The smaller tsunamis have historically been more frequent, while the worst case 35 meter run up event, triggered by an earthquake on the Cascadia Subduction Zone with associated submarine landslide, would occur less frequently. Geologic evidence indicates that the largest tsunamis have occurred every 200 to 1,000 years with an average of about every 500 years. The most recent large event was in 1700 and it is difficult to predict exactly when the next one will occur. The project will be designed to account for the more frequent smaller tsunamis and if

constructed, will provide an additional important evacuation route for visitors to Little River State Beach in the case of a larger event.

**Additional Criteria**

9. **Urgency:** The project needs to be completed before the next round of federal funding for non-motorized transportation becomes available, in order for the project to be competitive for construction funding.
10. **Leverage:** See the “Project Financing” section above.
11. **Readiness:** The grantee and project partners are prepared to undertake this project. RCAA has an excellent record of completing projects in a timely fashion.
12. **Realization of prior Conservancy goals:** “See “Project History” above.”
13. **Cooperation:** Caltrans, State Parks, and the Trinidad Coastal Land Trust are all committed to working on this project and moving it forward. See “Exhibit 3, Project Letters.”
14. **Minimization of greenhouse gas emissions:** The designs completed through this grant will include measures to avoid or minimize greenhouse gas emissions to the extent feasible and consistent with the project objectives.

**CONSISTENCY WITH LOCAL COASTAL PROGRAM POLICIES:**

The Little River forms the boundary between two area plans within Humboldt County’s Local Coastal Program, the Trinidad Area Plan (1995) and the McKinleyville Area Plan (1995). The area is also divided east/west between direct jurisdiction by the Coastal Commission and land falling under the jurisdiction of Humboldt County’s Local Coastal Program.

Access to and along the coast is promoted in both the Coastal Act, as well as Humboldt County’s Local Coastal Program. Coastal Act Sections 30210, 30211, and 30212 require the provision of maximum public access opportunities, with limited exceptions. Coastal Act Section 30210 requires, in applicable part, that maximum public access and recreational opportunities be provided when consistent with public safety, private property rights, and natural resource protection. Section 30211 requires, in applicable part, that development not interfere with the public’s right of access to the sea where acquired through use (i.e., potential prescriptive rights or rights of implied dedication). Section 30212 requires, in applicable part, that public access from the nearest public roadway to the shoreline and along the coast be provided in new development projects, except in certain instances, such as when adequate access exists nearby or when the provision of public access would be inconsistent with public safety.

The McKinleyville Area Plan recognizes coastal access as an existing use for lands immediately south of the Little River (Sections 4.22, 4.52). It also recommends improving public access through this portion of the project area (Section 4.52 B). North of the Little River, Moonstone Beach is included in the inventory of existing access points in the Trinidad Area Plan (Section 3.50 B 5).



The proposed project will also need to balance the preservation of habitat with public access as the south bank of the Little River was considered to be environmentally sensitive habitat by the Commission in their 2010 permit for work being conducted at Little River State Beach (Application Number 1-10-004) and by Section 3.41.A of the McKinleyville Area Plan. The McKinleyville Area Plan also allows for trails within riparian corridors and encourages them to cross the corridor in as little distance as possible (section 3.41F.5.h).

**CEQA COMPLIANCE:**

The proposed project is exempt from the California Environmental Quality Act (CEQA) pursuant to the CEQA Guidelines at California Code of Regulations, Title 14, Sections 15262, which exempts feasibility and planning studies for possible future actions from the requirement to prepare an Environmental Impact Report or negative declaration, and 15306, which exempts from CEQA basic data collection, research, and resource evaluation activities that will not disturb environmental resources. The proposed project consists of planning activities, preparation of designs, and review of environmental effects, none of which will impact any environmental resource(s) and all of which will be undertaken for possible future actions that the Conservancy has not yet approved, adopted, or funded. Staff will file a Notice of Exemption upon approval of this project.